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THE CAMP FIRE GIRLS IN THE DESERT  
THE CAMP FIRE GIRLS AT THE END OF THE TRAIL



"I Am Sorry," Billy Replied

## THE CAMP FIRE GIRLS' CAREERS

BY

MARGARET VANDERCOOK

Author of "The Ranch Girls Series," etc.

ILLUSTRATED

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### STORIES ABOUT CAMP FIRE GIRLS

Six Volumes

The Camp Fire Girls at Sunrise Hill  
The Camp Fire Girls Amid the Snows  
The Camp Fire Girls in the Outside World  
The Camp Fire Girls Across the Sea  
The Camp Fire Girls' Careers  
The Camp Fire Girls in After Years

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## The Camp Fire Girls' Careers

### CHAPTER I—Success or Failure

The entire theater was in darkness but for a single light burning at one corner of the bare stage, where stood a man and girl.

"Now once more, Miss Polly, please," the man said encouragingly. "That last try had a bit more life in it. Only do remember that you are supposed to be amusing, and don't wear such a tragic expression."

Then a stiff figure, very young, very thin, and with a tense white face, moved backward half a dozen steps, only to stumble awkwardly forward the next instant with both hands pressed tight together.

"I can't—I can't find it," she began uncertainly, "I have searched——"

Lifting her eyes at this moment to her companion's, Polly O'Neill burst into tears.

"I am a hopeless, abject failure, Mr. Hunt, and I shall never, never learn to act in a thousand years. There is no use in your trying to teach me, for if we remain at the theater for the rest of the day I shall make exactly the same mistakes tonight. Oh, how can I possibly play a funny character when my teeth are positively chattering with fright even at a rehearsal? It is sheer madness, my daring to appear with you and Margaret Adams before a first-night New York audience and in a new play. Even if I have only a tiny part, I can manage to make just as great a mess of it. Why, why did I ever dream I wished to have a career, I wonder. I only want to go back home this minute to Woodford and never stir a step away from that blessed village as long as I live."

"Heigho, says Mistress Polly," quoted her companion and then waited without smiling while the girl dried her tears.

"But you felt very differently from this several years ago when you acted with me in *The Castle of Life*," he argued in a reassuring tone. "Besides, you were then very young and had not had two years of dramatic training. I was amazed at your self-confidence, and now I don't understand why you should feel so much more nervous."

Polly squared her slender shoulders. "Yes you do, Mr. Hunt," she insisted, bluntly. "However, if you really don't understand, I think I can make you see in a moment. Four years ago when I behaved like a naughty child and without letting my friends or family know acted the part of the fairy of the woods in the Christmas pantomime, I had not the faintest idea of what a serious thing I was attempting. I did not even dream of how many mistakes I *could* make. Besides, that was only a school-girl prank and I never thought that any one in the audience might know me. But now, why at this moment I can hear dozens of people whispering: 'See that girl on the stage there taking the character of the maid, Belinda; she is Polly O'Neill. You may remember that she is one of the old Sunrise Hill Camp Fire girls and for years has been worrying her family to let her become an actress. I don't believe she will ever make a success. Really, she is the worst stick I ever saw on the stage!'"

10

And so real had her imaginary critic become that Polly shuddered and then clasped her hands together in a tragic fashion.

"Then think of my poor mother and my sister, Mollie, and Betty Ashton and a dozen or more of my old Camp Fire friends who have come to New York to see me make my *début* tonight! Can't you tell Miss Adams I am ill; isn't there some one who can take my place? I really am ill, you know, Mr. Hunt," Polly pleaded, the tears again starting to her eyes.

Since Polly's return from the summer in Europe, two years of eager ambition and hard work had been spent in a difficult training. As a result she looked older and more fragile. This morning her face was characteristically pale and the two bright patches of color usually burning on her cheek bones had vanished. Her chin had become so pointed that it seemed almost elfish, and her head appeared too small for its heavy crown of jet-black hair. Indeed, at this time in her life, in the opinion of strangers, only the blueness of her eyes with the Irish shadows underneath saved the girl from positive plainness. To her friends, of course, she was always just Polly and so beyond criticism.

11

Having finally through years of persuasion and Margaret Adams' added influence won her mother's consent to follow the stage for her profession, Polly had come to New York, where she devoted every possible hour of the day and night to her work. There had been hundreds of lessons in physical culture, in learning to walk properly and to sit down. Still more important had been the struggle with the pronunciation of even the simplest words, besides the hundred and one minor lessons of which the outsider never dreams. Polly had continued patient, hard-working and determined. No longer did she give performances of Juliet, draped in a red tablecloth, before audiences of admiring girls.

Never for a moment since their first meeting at the Camp Fire play in Sunrise Hill cabin had Margaret Adams ceased to show a deep interest in the wayward, ambitious and often unreliable Polly. She it was who had recommended the school in New York City and the master under whom Polly was to make her stage preparations. And here at the first possible moment Margaret Adams had offered her the chance for a *début* under the most auspicious conditions.

12

The play was a clever farce called *A Woman's Wit*, and especially written for the celebrated actress, who was to be supported by Richard Hunt, Polly's former acquaintance, as leading man.

Of course the play had been in rehearsal for several weeks; but Polly had been convinced that her own work had been growing poorer and poorer as each day went by.

"Look here, Miss O'Neill," a voice said harshly, and Polly stopped shaking to glance at her companion in surprise. During the last few months she and Richard Hunt had renewed their acquaintance and in every possible way Mr. Hunt had been kind and helpful. Yet now his manner had suddenly grown stern and forbidding.

13



Polly Stopped Shaking to Glance at Her Companion

“You are talking wildly and absurdly and like a foolish child instead of a woman,” he said coldly. “Surely you must know that you are having a rare chance tonight because of Miss Adams’ friendship and you must not disappoint her. If you fail to succeed, that will be unfortunate, but if you run away—” Suddenly Richard Hunt laughed. What a ridiculous suggestion! Of course Polly had only been talking in a silly school-girl fashion without any idea of being taken seriously. 14

“Good-by, Miss Polly, and cheer up,” Richard Hunt finally said, holding out his hand, his manner friendly once more; for after all she was only a frightened child and he was at least ten years her senior. “Doubtless you’ll put us all to shame tonight and Belinda will be the success of the evening.” Then as he moved away toward the stage door he added, “It was absurd of me to be so annoyed, but do you know, for a moment you made me believe you really thought of running away. What about the Camp Fire law of that famous club to which you once belonged? Did it not tell you to be trustworthy and not to undertake an enterprise rashly, but, having undertaken it, to complete it unflinchingly. Do go home now and rest, child, things are sure to turn out splendidly.” And with a smile of sympathy the man walked away. 15

So in another moment Polly was standing alone on an otherwise empty stage, torn with indecision and dread. Was Mr. Hunt right in believing that she had uttered only an idle threat in saying that she meant to run away? Yet would it not be wiser to disappear than to make an utter failure of her part tonight and be unable either to move or speak when the eyes of the audience were fixed expectantly upon her?

Slowly the girl walked toward the door, her face scarlet one moment, then like chalk the next. She could hear the scene-shifters moving about and realized that she would soon be in their way. But what should she do? Polly realized that if she went to her boarding place her mother and Mollie would be there waiting for her and then there could be no possible chance of escape.

Always Polly O’Neill had permitted herself to yield to sudden, nearly uncontrollable impulses. Should she do so now? In the last few years she believed she had acquired more self-control, better judgment. Yet in this panic of fear they had vanished once more. Of course Miss Adams would never forgive her, and no one would have any respect for her again. All this the girl realized and yet at the moment nothing appeared so dreadful as walking out on the stage and repeating the dozen or more sentences required of her. Rather would she have faced the guillotine. 16

“Finvarra and their land of heart’s desire,” Polly quoted softly and scornfully to herself. Well, she had been hoping that she was to reach the land of her heart’s desire tonight. Was this not to be the beginning of the stage career for which she had worked and prayed and dreamed?

Out on the street Polly was now walking blindly ahead. She had at last reached her decision, and yet how could she ever arrange to carry it out?

It was twenty-five minutes past eight o'clock and at half-past eight the curtain was to rise on the first performance of *A Woman's Wit*, written especially for Margaret Adams. And because of her popularity and that of her leading man, the house had been sold out weeks in advance.

The action of the play was to take place in a small town in Colorado, where a man and his wife were both endeavoring to be elected to the office of Mayor. Polly was to play the part of a clever little shop-girl, whom the heroine had brought into her home, supposedly as a parlor maid. But in reality the girl was to do all that was in her power to assist her mistress in gaining a victory over her husband. She was to watch his movements and to suggest any schemes that she might devise for their success.

18

In the act which Polly had recently been rehearsing she was engaged in trying to discover a political speech written by the hero, so that the wife might read it beforehand and so answer it in a convincing fashion before the evening meeting of the Woman's Club. The play was a witty farce, and Belinda was supposedly one of the cleverest and most amusing characters. Yet whether Polly could succeed in making her appear so was still exceedingly doubtful.

With this idea in mind Richard Hunt left his dressing room, hoping to see Polly for a few moments if possible before the play began. Perhaps her fright had passed. For already the man and girl were sufficiently intimate friends for him to understand how swiftly her moods changed.

Polly had apparently left her dressing room, since there was no answer to repeated knockings. She could not have carried out her threat of the morning? Of course such a supposition was an absurdity. And yet the man's frown relaxed and his smile was one of unconscious relief when a tall, delicate figure in a blue dress came hurrying toward him along the dimly-lighted passage-way. The girl did not seem aware of anything or anybody, so great was her hurry and nervousness. However, this was not unreasonable, for instead of having on her maid's costume for the performance, she was wearing an evening gown of shimmering silk and in the coiled braids of her black hair a single pink rose.

19

"You are late, Miss Polly; may I find some one to help you dress?"

Instantly a pair of blue eyes were turned toward him in surprise and reproach. They were probably not such intensely blue eyes as Polly O'Neill's and they had a far gentler expression, though they were of exactly the same shape. And the girl's hair was equally black, her figure and carriage almost similar, except that she was less thin. But instead of Polly's accustomed pallor this girl's cheeks were as delicately flushed as the rose in her hair. "Could an evening costume so metamorphose a human being?" Richard Hunt wondered in a vaguely puzzled, uncertain fashion.

A small hand was thrust forward without the least sign of haste, although it trembled a little from shyness.

20

"I'm not Polly, Mr. Hunt," the girl said smiling. "I am Mollie, her twin sister. But you must not mistake us, because even if we do *look* alike, we are not in the least alike in other ways. For one thing, I wouldn't be in Polly O'Neill's shoes tonight, not for this whole world with a fence around it. How can she do such a horrible thing as to be an actress? Polly considers that I haven't a spark of ambition, but why on earth should a sensible girl want a career?"

Suddenly Mollie blushed until her cheeks were pinker than before. "Oh, I am so sorry! I forgot for the moment that you were an actor, Mr. Hunt. Of course things are very different with you. A man *must* have a career! But I ought to apologize for talking to you without our having met each other. You see, Polly has spoken of you so many times, saying how kind you had been in trying to help her, that I thought for the instant I actually did know you. Forgive me, and now I *must* find Polly."

21

Mollie was always shy, but realizing all at once how much she had confided to a stranger, she felt overwhelmed with embarrassment. How the other girls would laugh if they ever learned of what she had said. Yet Mr. Hunt was not laughing at her, nor did he appear in the least offended. Mollie was sure he must be as kind as Polly had declared him, although he did look older than she had expected and must be quite thirty, as his hair was beginning to turn gray at the temples and there were heavy lines about the corners of his mouth. As Mollie now turned the handle of her sister's dressing-room door she was hoping that her new acquaintance had not noticed how closely she had studied him.

However, she need not have worried, for her companion was only thinking of how pretty she was and yet how oddly like her twin sister. For Mollie seemed to possess the very graces that Polly lacked. Evidently she was more amiable, better poised and more reliable, her figure was more attractive, her color prettier and her manner gracious and appealing.

22

"I am afraid you won't find your sister in there, Miss O'Neill. I have knocked several times without an answer," Richard Hunt finally interposed.

"Won't find her?" Mollie repeated the words in consternation. "Then where on earth is she? Miss Adams sent me to tell Polly that she wished to speak to her for half a moment before the curtain went up. Besides, Miss Ashton has already searched everywhere for her for quite ten minutes and then came back to her seat in the theater, having had to give up."

Forcibly Mollie now turned the handle of the door and peered in. The small room was unoccupied, as the other two members of the company who shared it with Polly, having dressed some time before, had also disappeared.

But Richard Hunt could wait no longer to assist in discovering the wanderer. Five minutes had

passed, so that his presence would soon be required upon the stage. Surely if Polly had failed to appear at the theater her sister would be aware of it. Yet there was still a chance that she had sent a hurried message to the stage director so that her character could be played by an understudy. Even Polly would scarcely wreck the play by simply failing at the last moment.

23

He was vaguely uneasy. He had been interested in Polly, first because of their chance acquaintance several years before when they both acted in *The Castle of Life*, and also because of Miss Adams' deep affection for her protégé. The man had been unable to decide whether Polly had any talent for the career which she professed to care for so greatly.

Now and then during the frequent rehearsals of their new play she had done very well. But the very day after a clever performance she was more than apt to give a poor one until the stage manager had almost despaired. Nevertheless Richard Hunt acknowledged to himself that there was something about the girl that made one unable to forget her. She was so intense, loving and hating, laughing and crying with her whole soul. Whatever her fate in after years, one could not believe that it would be an entirely conventional one.

His cue had been called and Miss Adams was already on the stage. In a quarter of an hour when Belinda was summoned by her mistress, he would know whether or not Polly had feigned illness or whether she had kept her threat and ignominiously run away.

24

The moment came. A door swung abruptly forward at the rear of the stage and through it a girl entered swiftly. She was dressed in a tight-fitting gray frock with black silk stockings and slippers. There was a tiny white cap on her head and she wore a small fluted apron. She looked very young, very clever and graceful. And it was Polly O'Neill, and Polly at her best!

For the briefest instant Richard Hunt and Margaret Adams exchanged glances. It was obvious that Margaret Adams had also been uneasy over her favorite's début. For her eyes brightened and she nodded encouragingly as the little maid set down the tray she was carrying with a bang and then turned saucily to speak to her master. A laugh from the audience followed her first speech.

The Polly of the morning had completely vanished. This girl's cheeks were crimson, her eyes danced with excitement and vivacity. She was fairly sparkling with Irish wit and grace and, best of all, she appeared entirely unafraid.

25

It was not alone Polly O'Neill's two comparatively new friends upon the stage with her, who now felt relieved from anxiety by her clever entrance. More than a dozen persons in the audience forming a large theater party occupying the sixth and seventh rows in the orchestra chairs, breathed inaudible sighs of relief.

There sat Betty Ashton and Dick and Esther, who had come down from Boston to New York City for Polly's début. Next Betty was a handsome, grave young man, who had only a few days before been elected to the New Hampshire Legislature by the residents of Woodford and the surrounding country, Anthony Graham. On his other side sat his sister, Nan, a dark-eyed, dark-haired girl with a quiet, refined manner. Near by and staring straight ahead through a pair of large, gold-rimmed spectacles was another girl with sandy hair, light blue eyes, a square jaw and a determined, serious expression. Nothing did Sylvia Wharton take lightly, and least of all the success or failure tonight of her adored step-sister. For Sylvia's ardent affection for Polly had never wavered since the early Camp Fire days at Sunrise Hill. And while she often disapproved of her and freely told her so, as she had then, still Polly knew that Sylvia could always be counted on through good and ill.

26

So far as the younger girl's own work was concerned there was little doubt of her success. Each year she had been at the head of her class in the training school for nurses and had since taken up the study of medicine. For Sylvia had never cared for frivolities, for beaux or dancing or ordinary good times. Polly often used to say that she would like to shake her younger step-sister for her utter seriousness, yet Sylvia rarely replied that she might have other and better reasons for administering the same discipline to Polly.

Back of this party of six friends Mr. and Mrs. Wharton, Polly's mother and stepfather, her sister Mollie and Billy Webster were seated. Billy, however, was no longer called by this youthful title except by his most intimate friends. He had never since the day Polly had teased him concerning it, asking him how it felt to be a shadowy imitation of a great man, used the name of Daniel. He was known to the people in Woodford and the neighborhood as William Webster, since Billy's father had died a year before and he now had the entire management of their large and successful farm. Indeed, the young man was considered one of the most expert of the new school of scientific farmers in his section of the country. And although Billy undoubtedly looked like a country fellow, there was no denying that he was exceedingly handsome. He was six feet tall, with broad shoulders and an erect carriage; his skin was tanned by the sun and wind, making his eyes appear more deeply blue and his hair almost the color of copper. Now seated next to Mollie he was endeavoring to make her less nervous, although any one could have seen he was equally nervous himself.

27

Frank Wharton and Eleanor Meade, who were to be married in a few months, were together, and next came yellow-haired Meg and her brother, John. Then only a few places away Rose and Dr. Barton and Faith, the youngest of the former group of Sunrise Hill Camp Fire girls, who had been adopted by her former guardian and now was known by Dr. Barton's name. Faith was an unusual-looking girl, with the palest gold hair which she wore tied back with a black velvet ribbon. She had a curious, far-away expression in her great blue eyes and the simplicity of a little child. For

28

Faith had never ceased her odd fashion of living in dreams, so that the real world was yet an unexplored country to her. Indeed, in her quaint short-waisted white muslin frock, with a tiny fan and a bunch of country flowers in her hand, she might have sat as one of the models for Arthur Rackham's spiritual, half-fairy children. Tonight she was even more quiet than usual, since this was the first time she had ever been inside a theater in her life. And had it not been for the reality of Polly O'Neill's presence, one of her very own group of Camp Fire girls, she must have thought herself on a different planet.

29

Herr and Frau Krippen had not been able to leave Woodford for this great occasion, since they boasted a very small and very new baby, with hair as red as its father's and as Esther's. But otherwise it looked singularly like the first of the Sunrise Hill Camp Fire guardians, the Miss Martha, whom the girls had then believed fore-ordained to eternal old-maidenhood.

So on this eventful night in her career, Polly O'Neill's old friends and family were certainly well represented. Fortunately, however, she had so far given no thought to their presence.

Now Belinda must rush frantically about on the stage, making a pretext of dusting the while she is eagerly listening to the conversation taking place between her master and mistress. Then in another moment they both leave the stage and Polly at last has her real opportunity. For with Margaret Adams present, naturally the chief attention of the audience would be concentrated upon her with her talent, her magnetism and her great reputation.

Yet as Miss Adams slipped away with a fleeting and encouraging lifting of her eyebrows toward her little maid, suddenly Polly O'Neill felt that the hour of her final reckoning had come. Curiously, until now she had not been self-conscious nor frightened; not for an instant had she been pursued by the terrors that had so harassed her all day that she had made a dozen plans to escape. Yet with the attention of the large audience suddenly riveted upon her alone, they were returning like a thousand fiends.

30

Polly felt like an atom surrounded by infinite space, like a spot of light in an eternity of darkness. Her voice had gone, her limbs were stiff, yet automatically she continued her dusting for a moment longer, hoping that a miracle might turn her into a human being again. Useless: her voice would never return, her legs felt as if they belonged to a figure in Mrs. Jarley's waxworks.

One could not devote the entire evening polishing the stage furniture! Already she could hear the agonized voice of the prompter whispering her lines, which he naturally supposed her to have forgotten.

In some fashion Polly must have dragged herself to the spot on the stage where she had been previously instructed to stand, and there somehow she must have succeeded in repeating the few sentences required of her, although she never knew how she did the one or the other; for soon the other players made their proper entrances and the unhappy Belinda was allowed to withdraw.

31

Yet although Polly could never clearly recall the events on the stage during these few moments, of one thing she was absolutely conscious. By some wretched accident she had glanced appealingly down, hoping to find encouragement in the face of her mother, sister, or Betty Ashton. Instead, however, she had caught the blue eyes of her old antagonist, Billy Webster, fixed upon her with such an expression of consternation, sympathy and amusement that she was never to forget the look for the rest of her life.

In the final scene, the one so diligently rehearsed during the morning, Belinda did not make such a complete failure. But, as she slipped away to her dressing room at the close of the performance, Polly O'Neill knew, before tongue or pen could set it down, the verdict that must follow her long-desired stage debut. Alas, that in this world there are many of us unlike Cæsar: we come, we see, but we do not conquer!

32

### CHAPTER III—Friends and Enemies

33

Standing outside in the dark passage for a moment, Polly hesitated with her hand on the door-knob, having already opened the door a few inches. From the inside she could plainly hear the voices of the two girls who shared the dressing room with her. Neither one of them had an important place in the cast. They merely came on in one of the scenes as members of a group and without speaking. However, they were both clever, ambitious girls whom Polly liked. Now her attention had been arrested by hearing the sound of her own name.

"Polly O'Neill was a dreadful failure, wasn't she?" one of them was saying. "Well, I am not in the least surprised. Indeed, it was just what I expected. Of course, she was only given the part of Belinda because of favoritism. Miss Adams is such a great friend of hers!"

34

Then before Polly could make her presence known the second girl replied:

"So far as I can see, Polly O'Neill has never shown a particle of ability at any of the rehearsals that would justify her being placed over the rest of us. I am sure that either you or I would have done far better. But never mind; perhaps some day we may be famous actresses and she nothing at all, when there is no *Miss Adams* to help her along."



But at this same instant Polly walked into the room.

"I am so sorry I overheard what you said, but it was entirely my fault, not yours," she began directly. "Only please don't think I intended to be eavesdropping. It was quite an accident my appearing just at the wrong moment. Of course I am hurt by your thinking I acted Belinda so poorly. Perhaps one of you *would* have been more successful. But do please understand that I realize perfectly that I had the chance given me because of Miss Adams' friendship and not because of my own talents." Then, though Polly's cheeks were flaming during her long speech and her tones not always steady, she smiled at her companions in entire good fellowship. 35

Immediately the older girl, walking across the floor, laid her hand on Polly's shoulder. "I am not going to take back *all* I said a while ago, for I meant a part of it," she declared half apologetically and half with bravado. "Honestly, I don't think you were very good as Belinda. But I have seen you act rather well at rehearsals now and then. I think you failed tonight because you suddenly grew so frightened. Don't be discouraged; goodness knows it has happened to many an actor before who afterwards became famous," she ended in an effort to be comforting.

"Yes, and it is all very well for us to talk here in our dressing rooms about being more successful than you were," the second girl added, "but there is no way of our proving that we would not have had even worse cases of stage fright." She gave Polly's hand a gentle squeeze. "Of course, you must know we are both jealous of Miss Adams' affection for you or we would never have been such horrid cats." The girl blushed. "Do try and forget what we said, it was horrid not to have been kinder and more sympathetic. You may have a chance to pay us back with interest some day. Anyhow, you are a splendid sport not to be angry. I am sure it is the people who take things as you have this who will win out in the end." 36

Then no one referred to the subject again. For it was plain that Polly was exhausted and that her nerves had nearly reached the breaking point. Instead, both girls now did their best to assist her in taking off the costume of the ill-fated Belinda and in getting into an ordinary street costume. For Polly was to meet her family and friends in a small reception room adjoining Miss Adams' dressing room, five minutes after the close of the play. She would have preferred to have marched up to the cannon's mouth, and she was much too tired at present either for congratulations or censure. She heard Mollie and Betty Ashton coming toward the door to seek for her.

Of course they were both immediately enthusiastic over Polly's *début* and were sure that she had been a pronounced success. For in the minds of her sister and friend, Polly was simply incapable of failure. And perhaps they did succeed in making the rest of the evening easier for her. But then all of her old Camp Fire and Woodford friends were as kind as possible. To have one of their own girls acting on a real stage seemed fame enough in itself. 37

But from two of her friends, from Sylvia Wharton and from Billy Webster, Polly received the truth as they saw it. Sylvia's came with spoken words, and Billy's by a more painful silence.

As Polly entered the room, Sylvia came forward, and kissed her solemnly. The two girls had not seen each other for a number of weeks. Sylvia had only arrived in New York a few hours before.

"You were dreadfully nervous, Polly, just as I thought you would be," Sylvia remarked quietly, holding her step-sister's attention by the intensity and concentration of her gaze behind the gold-rimmed spectacles. "Now I am afraid you are fearfully tired and upset. I do wish you would go home immediately and go to bed instead of talking to all these people. But I suppose you have already decided because you did not act as well as you expected this evening that you will never do any better. Promise me to be reasonable this one time, Polly, and may I see you alone and have a talk with you tomorrow?" 38

Then there was only time for the older girl to nod agreement and to place her hot hand for an instant into Sylvia's large, strong one, that already had a kind of healing touch.

For Mrs. Wharton was now demanding her daughter's attention, wishing to introduce her to friends. Since she had finally made up her mind to allow Polly to try her fate as an actress, Mrs. Wharton had no doubt of her ultimate brilliant success.

Five minutes afterwards, quite by accident, Richard Hunt found himself standing near enough to Polly to feel that he must also say something in regard to her *début*.

"I am glad Belinda did not run away today, Miss Polly," he whispered. "Do you know I almost believed she intended to for a few moments this morning?" And the man smiled at the absurdity of his idea.

Polly glanced quickly up toward her companion, a warm flush coloring her tired face. "It might have been better for the play if I had, Mr. Hunt, I'm a-thinking," she answered with a mellow Irish intonation in the low tones of her voice. "But you need not think I did not mean what I said. Don't tell on me, but I had a ticket bought and my bag packed and all my plans made for running away and then at the last even I could not be quite such a coward." The girl's expression changed. "Perhaps, after all, I may yet be forced into using that ticket some day," she added, half laughing and half serious, as she turned to speak to some one else who had joined them. 39

For another idle moment the man still thought of his recent companion. How much or how little of her rash statements did the child mean? Yet he might have spared himself the trouble of this reflection, for this question about Polly was never to be satisfactorily answered.

Although by this time the greater number of persons in Margaret Adams' reception room had 40

spoken to Polly either to say kind things or the reverse, there was, however, one individual who had devoted his best efforts to avoiding her. Yet there had never been such an occasion before tonight. For whether he chanced to be angry with her at the moment or pleased, Billy Webster had always enjoyed the opportunity of talking to Polly, since she always stirred his deepest emotions, no matter what the emotions chanced to be. Tonight he had no desire to repeat the fatal words, "I told you so."

Of course he had always known that Polly O'Neill would never be a successful actress; she was far too erratic, too emotional. If only she had been sensible for once and listened to him that day in the woods long ago! Suddenly Billy squared his broad shoulders and closed his firm young lips. For, separating herself from every one else, Polly was actually marching directly toward him, and she had ever an uncanny fashion of guessing what was going on in other people's heads.

Underneath his country tan Billy Webster blushed furiously and honestly.

"You think I was a rank failure, don't you?" Polly demanded at once.

Still speechless, the young man nodded his head.

"You don't believe I ever will do much better?" Again Billy nodded agreement.

"And that I had much better have stayed at home in Woodford and learned to cook and sew and—and—well, some day try to be somebody's wife?" the girl ended a little breathlessly.

This time Billy Webster did not mince matters. "I most assuredly do," he answered with praiseworthy bluntness.

Now for the first time since her fiasco as Belinda, Polly's eyes flashed with something of their old fire. And there in the presence of the company, though unheeded by them, she stamped her foot just as she always had as a naughty child.

"I will succeed, Billy Webster, I will, I will! I don't care how many failures I may make in learning! And just because I want to be a good actress is no reason why I can't marry some day, if there is any man in the world who could both love and understand me and who would not wish to make me over according to his own particular pattern." Then Polly smiled. "Thank you a thousand times, though, Billy, for you are the solitary person who has done me any good tonight. It is quite like old times, isn't it, for us to start quarreling as soon as we meet. But, farewell, I must go home now and to bed." Polly held out her hand. "You are an obstinate soul, Billy, but I can't help admiring you for the steadfast way in which you disapprove of me."

## CHAPTER IV—Farewell!

Margaret Adams was in her private sitting room in her own home, an old-fashioned red brick house near Washington Square. She had been writing letters for more than an hour and had just seated herself in a big chair and closed her eyes. She looked very young and tiny at this instant to be such a great lady. Her silk morning dress was only a shade lighter than the rose-colored chair.

Suddenly ten fingers were lightly laid over her eyes.

"Guess who I am or I shall never release you," a rich, soft voice demanded, and Margaret Adams drew the fingers down and kissed them.

"Silly Polly, as if it could be any one else? What ever made you come out in this rain, child? You had a cold, anyway, and it is a perfectly beastly day."

Instead of replying, Polly sat down in front of a small, open fire, putting her toes up on the fender.

"You are a hospitable lady," she remarked finally, "but I am not wet specially. I left my damp things down stairs so as not to bring them into this pretty room. It always makes me think of the rose lining to a cloud; one could never have the blues in here."

The room was charming. The walls were delicately pink, almost flesh color, with a deeper pink border above. A few original paintings were hung in a low line—one of an orchard with apple trees in spring bloom. The mantel was of white Italian marble with a bust of Dante's Beatrice upon it and this morning it also held a vase of roses. Over near the window a desk of inlaid mahogany was littered with letters, papers, writing materials and photographs. On a table opposite the newest magazines and books were carefully arranged, together with a framed photograph of Polly and Margaret Adams' taken when they were in London several years before. There was also a photograph of Richard Hunt and several others of distinguished men and women who were devoted friends of the famous actress.

A big, rose-colored divan was piled with a number of silk and velvet cushions of pale green and rose. Then there were other odd chairs and tables and shaded lamps and curtains of rose-colored damask hung over white net. But the room was neither too beautiful nor fanciful to be homelike and comfortable. Two or three ugly things Margaret Adams still kept near her for old associations' sake and these alone, Polly insisted, made it possible for her to come into this room. For she, too, was an ugly thing, allowed to stay there now and then because of past association.

Polly was not looking particularly well today. She had been acting for ten days in *A Woman's Wit*, though that would scarcely explain her heavy eyelids, nor her colorless cheeks. Polly's eyes were so big in her white face and her hair so black that actually she looked more like an Irish pixie than an ordinary every-day girl.

46

"You'll stay to lunch with me, Polly, and I'll send you home in my motor," Margaret Adams announced authoritatively. "I suppose your mother and Mollie have gone back to Woodford? I know Betty has returned to Boston, she came in to say good-by and to tell me that she is spending the winter in Boston with her brother, Dr. Ashton, and his wife. Betty is really prettier than ever, don't you think so? I believe it was you, Polly, who really saved Betty from marrying her German princeling, but what will the child do now without you to look after her?"

Margaret Adams arose and walked across the room, presumably to ring for her maid, but in reality to have a closer look at her visitor. For Polly had not yet answered her idle questions; nor did she even show the slightest interest in the mention of her beloved Betty's name. Something most unusual must be the matter with her.

"I *should* like to stay to lunch if no one else is coming," Polly returned a moment later. "I did not like to disturb you earlier. There is something I want to tell you and so I might as well say it at once. I am not going to try to act Belinda any longer. I am going away from New York tomorrow. Yet you must not think I am ungrateful, even though I am not going to tell you where I am going nor what I intend to do." Polly clasped her thin arms about her knees and began slowly rocking herself back and forth with her eyes fastened on the fire, as though not daring to glance toward her friend.

47

At first Margaret Adams made no reply. Then she answered coldly and a little disdainfully: "So you are playing the coward, Polly! Instead of trying each night to do better and better work you are running away. If for an instant I had dreamed that you had so little courage, so little backbone, I never should have encouraged you to enter one of the most difficult professions in the whole world. Come, dear, you are tired and perhaps ill. I ought not to scold you. But I want you to forget what you have just said. Goodness knows, I have not forgotten the bitterly discouraged days I used to have and do still have every now and then. Only somehow I hoped a Camp Fire girl might be different, that her club training might give her fortitude. Remember 'Wohelo means work. We glorify work because through work we are free. We work to win, to conquer and be masters. We work for the joy of working and because we are free.' Long ago I thought you and I decided that the Camp Fire rules would apply equally well to whatever career a girl undertook, no matter what she might try to do or be."

48

"Oh, I have not forgotten; I think of our old talks very often," was Polly's unsatisfactory reply.

A little nearer the fire Margaret Adams now drew her own big chair. It was October and the rain was a cold one, making the blaze comforting. The whole atmosphere of the room was peculiarly intimate and cozy and yet the girl did not appear any happier.

"I wonder if you would like to hear of my early trials, Polly?" Margaret asked. "Not because they were different from other people's, but perhaps because they were so like. I believe I promised to tell you my history once several years ago."

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The older woman did not glance toward her visitor, as she had no doubt of her interest. Instead she merely curled herself up in her chair like a girl eager to tell a most interesting story.

"You see, dear, I made my *début* not when I was twenty-one like you are, but when I was exactly seven. Of course even now one does not like to talk of it, but I never remember either my father or mother. They were both actors and died when I was very young, leaving me without money and to be brought up in any way fate chose. I don't know just why I was not sent at once to an orphan asylum, but for some reason or other a woman took charge of me who used to do all kinds of odd work about the theater, help mend clothes, assist with the dressing, scrub floors if necessary. She was frightfully poor, so of course there is no blame to be attached to her for making me try to earn my own bread as soon as possible. And bread it was *actually*." Margaret Adams laughed, yet not with the least trace of bitterness. "A child was needed in a play, one of the melodramas that used to be so popular when I was young, a little half-starved waif. I dare say I had no trouble in looking the part. You see I'm not very big now, Polly, so I must have been a ridiculously thin, homely child, all big staring eyes and straight brownish hair. I was engaged to stand outside a baker's shop window gazing wistfully in at a beautiful display of shiny currant buns until the heroine appeared. Then, touched by my plight, she nobly presented me with a penny with which I purchased a bun. Well, dear, that piece of bread was all the pay I received for my night's performance, and it was all the supper I had. One night—funny how I can recall it all as if it were yesterday—coming out of the shop I stumbled, dropped my bun and at the same instant saw it rolling away from me down toward the blazing row of footlights. I had not a thought then of where I was or of anything in all the world but that I was a desperately hungry child, losing my supper. So with a pitiful cry I jumped up and ran after my bread. When I picked it up I think I hugged it close to me like a treasure and kissed it. Well, dear, you can imagine that the very unconsciousness, the genuineness of the little act won the audience. I know a good many people cried that night and afterwards. The reason I still remember the little scene so perfectly was because after that first time I had to do the same thing over and over again as long as the play ran. It was my first 'hit,' Polly, though I never understood what it meant for years and years afterwards."

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51

"Poor baby," Polly whispered softly, taking her friend's hand and touching it with her lips. "But I don't care how or why the thing happened I have always known that you must have been a genius

from the very first.”

“Genius?” The older woman smiled, shaking her head. “I don’t think so, Polly; I may have had some talent, although it took me many years to prove it. Mostly it has all been just hard work with me and beginning at seven, you see I have had a good many years. Do you think I became famous immediately after I captured the audience and the bun? My dear, I don’t believe I have ever known another girl as impossible as I was as an actress after I finally grew up. I did not continue acting. My foster mother married and I was then sent to school for a number of years. Finally, when I was sixteen, I came back to the stage, though I did not have a speaking part till five years later. You see, I was not pretty, and I never got very big in spite of the buns. It was not until I played in *The Little Curate* years after that I made any kind of reputation.”

52

Margaret Adams leaned over and put both hands on Polly’s thin shoulders.

“Don’t you see, dear, how silly, how almost wicked you will be if you run away from the opportunity I am able to give you. I never had any one to help me. It was all nothing but hard, wearing work and few friends, with almost no encouragement.”

“I see, Margaret,” Polly returned gravely. Then, getting up, she sat for a few moments on the arm of her friend’s chair. “Yet I *must* give up the chance you have given me just the same, dear, and I *must* go away from New York tomorrow. I can’t tell you why I am going or where because I am afraid you might dissuade me. Oh, I suppose it is foolish, even mad, of me, but I would not be myself if I were reasonable, and I am doing what seems wisest to me. I have written to mother and made her understand and to Sylvia because she almost forced me into promising her that I would keep her informed this winter where I was and what I was doing. I am not confiding in any one else in the whole world. But if you think I am ungrateful, Margaret, you think the very wrongest thing in the whole world and I’ll prove it to you one day, no matter what it costs. The most dreadful part is that I am not going to be able to see you for a long time. That is the hardest thing. You will never know what you have meant to me in these last few years when I have been away from home and my old friends. But I believe you are lonely too, dear, now and then in spite of your reputation and money and all the people who would like to know you.” Polly got up now and began walking restlessly about the room, not knowing how to say anything more without betraying her secret.

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She glanced at the photograph of Richard Hunt.

54

“Are you and Mr. Hunt very special friends, Margaret?” Polly asked, an idea having suddenly come into her mind. “I think he is half as nice as you are and that is saying a great deal.”

For a perceptible moment Margaret Adams did not reply and then she seemed to hesitate, perhaps thinking of something else. “Yes, we have been friends for a number of years, sometimes intimate ones, sometimes not,” she returned finally. “But I don’t want to talk about Mr. Hunt. I still want to be told what mad thing Polly O’Neill is planning to do next.”

“And if she can’t tell you?” Polly pleaded.

“Then I suppose I will have to forgive her, because friendship without faith is of very little value.”

And at this instant Margaret Adams’ maid came in to announce luncheon.

## CHAPTER V—Other Girls

55

“No, I am not in the least unhappy or discontented either, Esther; I don’t know how you can say such a thing,” Betty Ashton answered argumentatively. “You talk as though I did not like living here with you and Dick. You know perfectly well I might have gone south with mother for the winter if I had not a thousand times preferred staying with you.” Yet as she finished her speech, quite unconsciously Betty sighed.

She and Esther were standing in a pretty living room that held a grand piano, shelves of books, a desk and reading table; indeed, a room that served all purposes except that of sleeping and dining. For Dick and Esther had taken a small house on the outskirts of Boston and were beginning their married life together as simply as possible, until Dr. Ashton should make a name and fame for himself.

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Esther was now dressed for going out in a dark brown suit and hat with mink furs and a muff. Happiness and the fulfilling of her dreams had given her a beauty and dignity which her girlhood had not held. She was larger and had a soft, healthy color. With the becoming costumes which Betty now helped her select her red hair had become a beauty rather than a disfigurement and the content in her eyes gave them more color and depth, while about her always beautiful mouth the lines were so cheerful and serene that strangers often paused to look at her the second time and then went their way with a new sense of encouragement.

Betty had no thought of going out, although it was a brilliant December day. She had on a blue cashmere house dress and her hair was loosely tucked up on her head in a confusion of half-tangled curls. She had evidently been dusting, for she still held a dusting cloth in her hand. Her manner was listless and uninterested, and she was pale and frowning a little. Her gayety and vitality, temporarily at least, were playing truant.

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"Still I know perfectly well, Betty dear, that you came to be with Dick and me this winter not only because you wanted to come, but because you knew your board would help us along while Dick is getting his start. So it is perfectly natural that you should be lonely and miss your old friends in Woodford. Of course, Meg isn't far away here at Radcliffe, but she is so busy with Harvard students as well as getting her degree that you don't see much of each other. Suppose you come now and take a walk with me, or else you ride with Dick and I'll go on the street car. I am only going to church for a rehearsal. You know I am to sing a solo on Sunday," Esther continued in a persuasive tone.

"Yes, and of course Dick would so much prefer taking his sister to ride than taking his wife," the other girl returned rather pettishly, abstractedly rubbing the surface of the mahogany table which already shone with much polishing.

Esther shook her head. "Well, even though you won't confess it, something is the matter with you, Betty. You have not been a bit like yourself since you were in Woodford last fall. Something must have happened there. I don't wish your confidence unless you desire to give it me. But even while we were in New York, you were cold and stiff and unlike yourself, especially to Anthony Graham, and I thought you used to be such good friends."

There was no lack of color now in Betty Ashton's face, although she still kept her back turned to her older sister.

"We are not special friends any longer," she returned coldly, "though I have nothing in the world against Anthony. Of course, I consider that he is rather spoiled by his political success, being elected to the Legislature when he is so young, but then that is not my affair." Betty now turned her face toward her sister. "I suppose I need something to do—that is really what is the matter with me, Esther dear. Lately I have been thinking that I am the only one of the old Sunrise Hill Camp Fire girls who amounts to nothing. And I wanted so much to be loyal to our old ideals. There is Meg at college, Sylvia and Nan both studying professions, Edith married and Eleanor about to be. You have Dick, your music and your house, Mollie is relieving her mother of the responsibility of their big establishment and even little Faith had a poem published in a magazine last week. It is hard to be the only failure. Then of course there is Polly!"

"Never a word from her in all this time?"

"Not a line since the note I received from her last October asking me not to be angry if I did not hear from her in a long time. No one has the faintest idea what has become of her—none of her friends, not even Mollie knows. I suppose she is all right though, because her mother is satisfied about her. Yet I can't help wondering and feeling worried. What on earth could have induced Polly O'Neill to give up her splendid chance with Miss Adams, a chance she has been working and waiting for these two years?" Betty shrugged her shoulders. "It is stupid of me to be asking such questions. No one yet has ever found the answer to the riddle of Polly O'Neill. Perhaps that is why she is so fascinating. I always do and say exactly what people expect, so no wonder I am uninteresting. But there, run along, Esther, I hear Dick whistling for you. Don't make him late. Perhaps I'll get over having 'the dumps' while you are away."

Esther started toward the door. "If only I could think of something that would interest or amuse you! I can't get hold of Polly to cheer you up, but I shall write Mrs. Wharton this very evening and ask her to let Mollie come and spend Christmas with us. I believe Dick has already asked Anthony Graham. You won't mind, will you, Betty? We wanted to have as many old friends as possible in our new house."

Once again Betty flushed uncomfortably, although she answered carelessly enough. "Certainly I don't mind. Why should I? Now do run along. Perhaps I'll make you and Dick a cake while you are gone. An old maid needs to have useful accomplishments."

Esther laughed. "An old maid at twenty-one! Well, farewell, Spinster Princess. I know you are a better cook and housekeeper than I am." In answer to her husband's more impatient whistling Esther fled out of the room, though still vaguely troubled. Betty was not in good spirits, yet what could be the matter with her? Of course, she missed the stimulus of Polly's society; however, that in itself was not a sufficient explanation. What could have happened between Betty and Anthony? Actually, there had been a time when Dick had feared that they might care seriously for each other. Thank goodness, that was a mistake!

Left alone Betty slowly drew out a letter from inside her blue gown. It had previously been opened; but she read it for the second time. Then, lighting a tall candle on the mantel, she placed the letter in the flame, watching it burn until finally the charred scraps were thrown aside.

Betty had evidently changed her mind in regard to her promise to her sister. For instead of going into the kitchen a very little while later she came downstairs dressed for the street. Opening the front door, she went out into the winter sunshine and started walking as rapidly as possible in the direction of one of the poorer quarters of the city.

## CHAPTER VI—The Fire-Maker's Desire

Outside the window of a small florist's shop Betty paused for an instant. Then she stepped in and

a little later came out carrying half a dozen red roses and a bunch of holly and fragrant cedar. Curiously enough, her expression in this short time had changed. Perhaps the flowers gave the added color to her face. She was repeating something over to herself and half smiling; but, as there were no people on the street except a few dirty children who were playing cheerfully in the gutter, no one observed her eccentric behavior.

63



She Came Out Carrying Red Roses, Holly and Cedar

“As fuel is brought to the fire  
So I purpose to bring  
My strength,  
My ambition,  
My heart’s desire,  
My joy  
And my sorrow  
To the fire  
Of humankind.  
For I will tend,  
As my fathers have tended,  
And my father’s fathers,  
Since time began,  
The fire that is called  
The love of man for man,  
The love of man for God.”

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Betty’s delicate, eyebrows were drawn so close together that they appeared almost heart shaped. “I fear I have only been tending the love of a girl for herself these past few months, so perhaps it is just as well that I should try to reform,” she thought half whimsically and yet with reproach. “Anyhow, I shall telephone Meg Everett this very afternoon, though I am glad Esther does not know the reason Meg and I have been seeing so little of each other lately, and that the fault is mine, not hers.”

By this time the girl had arrived in front of a large, dull, brown-stone building in the middle of a dingy street, with a subdued hush about it. Above the broad entrance hung a sign, “Home For Crippled Children.” Here for a moment Betty Ashton’s courage seemed to waver, for she paused irresolutely, but a little later she entered the hall. A week before she had promised an acquaintance at the church where Esther was singing to come to the children’s hospital some day and amuse them by telling stories. Since she had not thought seriously of her promise, although intending to fulfill it when she had discovered stories worth the telling. This morning while worrying over her own affair it had occurred to her that the best thing she could do was to do something for some one else. Hence the visit to the hospital.

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Yet here at the moment of her arrival Betty had not the faintest idea of what she could do or say to make herself acceptable as a visitor. She had a peculiar antipathy to being regarded as a conventional philanthropist, one of the individuals with the instinct to patronize persons less fortunate.

Long ago when through her wealth and sympathy Betty had been able to do helpful things for her

66

acquaintances, always she had felt the same shrinking sense of embarrassment, disliking to be thanked for kindnesses. Yet actually in his last letter Anthony Graham had dared remind her of their first meeting, an occasion she wished forgotten between them both.

The matron of the children's hospital had been sent for and a little later she was conducting Betty down a broad, bare hall and then ushering her into a big sunlit room, not half so cheerless as its visitor had anticipated.

There were two large French windows on the southern side and a table piled with books and magazines. Near one of these windows two girls were seated in rolling chairs reading. They must have been about fourteen years old and did not look particularly frail. Across from them were four other girls, perhaps a year or so younger, engaged in a game of parchesi. On the floor in the corner a pretty little girl was sewing on her doll clothes and another was hopping merrily about on her crutches, interfering with every one else. Only two of the cot beds in the room were occupied, and to these Betty's eyes turned instinctively. In one she saw a happy little German maiden with yellow hair and pale pink cheeks propped up on pillows, busily assorting half a dozen colors of crochet cotton. In the other a figure was lying flat with the eyes staring at the ceiling. And at the first glance there was merely an effect of some one indescribably thin with a quantity of short, curly dark hair spread out on the white pillow.

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The matron introduced Betty, told her errand, and then went swiftly away, leaving her to do the rest for herself, and the rest appeared exceedingly difficult. The older girls who were reading closed their books politely and bowed. Yet it was self-evident that they would have preferred going on with their books to hearing anything their visitor might have to tell. Among the parchesi players there was a hurried consultation and then one of them looked up. "We will be through with our game in a few moments," she explained with a note of interrogation in her voice.

"Oh, please don't stop on *my* account," the newcomer said hastily.

On the big table Betty put down her roses and evergreens, not liking to present them with any formality under the circumstances. She could see that the little girl who was sewing in the corner was smiling a welcome to her and that the little German *Mädchen* in bed was pleased with her winter bouquet. For she had whispered, "*Schön, wunderschön,*" and stopped assorting her crochet work. Then the child on crutches came across the floor, and picking up one of the roses placed it on the pillow by the dark-eyed girl, who showed not the least sign of having noticed the attention.

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"She will look at it in a moment if she thinks we are not watching her," explained Betty's one friendly confidant, motioning to a chair to suggest that their visitor might sit down if she wished.

It was an extremely awkward situation. Betty sat down. She had come to make a call at a place where her society was not desired and though they were only children, and she a grown woman, still she had no right to intrude upon their privacy. She found herself blushing furiously. Besides, what story had she to tell that would be of sufficient interest to hold their attention? Had she not thought of at least a dozen, only to discard them all as unsuitable?

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"I believe you were going to entertain us, I suppose with a fairy story," began one of the girls, still keeping her finger between the covers of *Little Women*. It was hard luck to be torn away from that delightful love scene between Laurie and Jo to hear some silly tale of princes and princesses and probably a golden apple when one was fourteen years old. However, this morning's visitor was so pretty it was a pleasure to look at her. Besides, she had on lovely clothes and was dreadfully embarrassed. Moreover, she was sitting quite still and helpless instead of poking about, asking tiresome questions as most visitors did. One could not avoid feeling a little sorry for *her* instead of having to receive her pity.

Both wheeled chairs were now rolled over alongside Betty and *Little Women* was closed and laid on the table. The next instant the parchesi game was finished and the four players glanced with greater interest at their guest. The girl who had been dancing about on her crutches hopped up on the table.

70

"I am 'Cricket' not on the hearth, but on the table at this moment," she confided gayly; "at least, that is what the girls here call me and it is as good a name as any other. Now won't you tell us your name?"

"Betty Ashton," the visitor answered, still feeling ill at ease and angry and disgusted with herself for not knowing how to make the best of the situation. Yet she need no longer have worried. For there was some silent, almost indescribable influence at work in the little company until almost irresistibly most of its occupants felt themselves drawn toward the newcomer. Of course, Polly O'Neill would have described this influence as the Princess' charm and that is as good an explanation as any other. But I think it was Betty Ashton's ability to put herself in other people's places, to think and feel and understand for them and with them. Now she knew that these eight girls, poor and ill though they might be, did not want either her pity or her patronage.

"Well, fire away with your tale, Miss Ashton," suggested Cricket somewhat impatiently, "and don't make it too goody-goody if you can help it. Most of us are anxious to hear." Cricket had pretty gray eyes and a great deal of fluffy brown hair, but otherwise the face was plain, except for its clever, good-natured expression. She gave a sudden side glance toward the figure on the bed only a dozen feet away and Betty's glance followed hers.

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She saw that the red rose had been taken off the pillow and that the eyes that had been staring at the ceiling were gazing toward her. However, their look was anything but friendly.

For some foolish, unexplainable reason the girl made Betty think of Polly. Yet this child's eyes were black instead of blue, her hair short and curly instead of long and dark. And though Polly had often been impatient and dissatisfied, thank heaven she had never had that expression of sullen anger and of something else that Betty could not yet understand.

For Betty had of course to turn again toward her auditors and smile an entirely friendly and charming smile.

"May I take off my hat first? It may help me to think," she said. Then when Cricket had helped her remove both her coat and hat she sat down again and sighed. 72

"Do you know I have come here under absolutely false pretences? I announced that I had a story to tell, but I simply can't think of anything that would entertain you in the least and I should so hate to be a bore."

Then in spite of her twenty-one years, Betty Ashton seemed as young as any girl in the room. Moreover, she was exquisitely pretty. Her auburn hair, now neatly coiled, shone gold from the light behind her. Her cheeks were almost too flushed and every now and then her dark lashes drooped, shading the frank friendliness of her gray eyes. She wore a walking skirt, beautifully tailored, and a soft white silk blouse with a knot of her same favorite blue velvet pinned at her throat with her torch-bearer's pin.

Agnes Edgerton, the former reader of *Little Women*, made no effort to conceal her admiration. "Oh, don't tell us a story," she protested, "we read such a lot of books. Tell us something about yourself. Real people are so much more interesting." 73

"But there isn't anything very interesting about me, I am far too ordinary a person," Betty returned. Then she glanced almost desperately about the big room. There was a mantel and a fireplace, but no fire, as the room was warmed with steam radiators. However, on the mantel stood three brass candlesticks holding three white candles and these may have been the source of Betty's inspiration.

Outside the smoky chimney tops of old Boston houses and factories reared their heads against the winter sky, and yet Betty began her story telling with the question: "I wonder if you would like me to tell you of a summer twelve girls spent together at Sunrise Hill?" For in the glory of the early morning, with the Camp Fire cabin at its base, Sunrise Hill had suddenly flashed before her eyes like a welcome vision.

## CHAPTER VII—"The Flames in the Wind" 74

When an hour later Betty Ashton finished her story of the first years of the Camp Fire girls at Sunrise Hill on the table nearby three candles were burning and about them was a circle of eager faces.

Moreover, from the cedar which Betty had bought as a part of her winter bouquet a miniature tree had been built as the eternal Camp Fire emblem and there also were the emblems of the wood gatherer, fire maker and torch bearer constructed from odd sticks which Cricket had mysteriously produced in the interval of the story telling.

"That is the most delightful experience that I ever heard of girls having, a whole year out of doors with a chance to do nice things for yourself, a fairy story that was really true," Cricket sighed finally. "Funny, but I never heard of a Camp Fire club and I have never been to the country." 75

"You have never been to the country?" Betty repeated her words slowly, staring first at Cricket and then at the other girls. No one else seemed surprised by the remark.

In answer the younger girl flushed. "I told you I had not," she repeated in a slightly sarcastic tone. "But please don't look as if the world had come to an end. Lots of poor people don't do much traveling and we have five children in the family besides me. Of course, I couldn't go on school picnics and Sunday-school excursions like the others." Here an annoyed, disappointed expression crept into Cricket's eyes and she grew less cheerful.

"Please don't spoil our nice morning together, Miss Ashton, by beginning to pity me. I hate people who are sorry for themselves. That is the reason we girls have liked you so much, you have been so different from the others."

Quietly Betty began putting on her wraps. She had been watching Cricket's face all the time she had been talking of Sunrise Hill, of the grove of pine trees and the lake. Yet if the thought had leapt into her mind that she would like to show her new acquaintance something more beautiful than the chimney tops of Boston, it was now plain that she must wait until they were better friends. 76

"But you'll come again soon and tell us more?" Cricket next asked, picking up their visitor's muff and pressing it close to her face with something like a caress. Then more softly, "I did not mean to be rude."

Betty nodded. "Of course I'll come if you wish me. You see, I am a stranger in Boston and lonely. But I'll never have anything half so interesting to tell you as the history of our club with such



girls as Polly O'Neill, Esther and Meg and the rest for heroines. Nothing in my whole life has ever been such fun. Do you know I was wondering——”

Here a slight noise from the figure on the cot near them for an instant distracted Betty's attention. Yet glancing in that direction, there seemed to have been no movement. Not for a single moment did she believe the little girl had been listening to a word she was saying. For she had never caught another glance straying in her direction. 77

“You were wondering what?” Agnes Edgerton demanded a little impatiently and Betty thought she saw the same expression on all the faces about her.

“Wondering if you would like my sister, Esther, to come and sing our old Camp Fire songs to you some day?” This time there was no mistaking it. Her audience did look disappointed. “And wondering something else, only perhaps I had best wait, you may not think it would be fun, or perhaps it might be too much work——” Betty's face was flushed, again she seemed very little older than the other girls about her.

“Yes, we would,” Agnes Edgerton answered gravely, having by this time quite forgotten the interruption of *Little Women* in her new interest. “I know what you mean, because almost from the start I have been wondering the same thing. Do you think we girls could start a Camp Fire club here among ourselves, if you would show us how? Why, it would make everything so much easier and happier. There are some of the Camp Fire things we could not do, of course, but the greater part of them——” 78

Here, with a sudden exclamation of pleasure, Cricket bounced off her perch on the table and began dancing about in a fashion which showed how she had earned her name.

“Hurrah for the Shut-In Camp Fire Girls and the fairy princess who brought us the idea!” she exclaimed. Then, surveying Betty more critically, “You know you do look rather like a princess. Are you one in disguise?”

Betty laughed. She had not felt so cheerful in months. For with Agnes and Cricket on her side, the thought that had slowly been growing in her mind would surely bear fruit. But how strangely her old title sounded! How it did bring back the past Camp Fire days!

“No,” she returned, “I am not a princess or anything in the least like one. But we can all have new names in our Camp Fire club if we like, select any character or idea we choose and try to live up to it. Next time I come I will try and explain things better and bring you our manual. Now I really must hurry.” 79

Betty Ashton was moving quickly toward the door, accompanied by Cricket, when a hand reached suddenly out from the side of a bed clutching at her skirt.

“I would rather have that Polly girl come the next time instead of you; I am sure I should like her much better,” the voice said with a decidedly foreign accent. Then Betty looked quickly into the pair of black eyes that had been so relentlessly fixed upon the ceiling.

“I don't wonder you would rather have the Polly girl instead of me,” she returned smiling; “most people would, and perhaps you may see her some day if I can find her. Only I don't know where she is just at present.”

So this strange child had been listening to her story-telling after all. Curious that her fancy had lighted upon Polly, but perhaps the name carried its own magic.

Out in the hall Betty whispered to her companion:

“Tell me that little girl's name, won't you, Cricket? I didn't dare ask her. What a strange little thing she is, and yet she makes me think of an old friend. Already I believe she has taken a dislike to me.” 80

The other girl shrugged her shoulders. “Don't be flattered, she dislikes everybody and won't have anything to do with the rest of us if she can help it. Yet her name is Angelique, that is all we know. ‘The Angel’ we call her when we wish to make her particularly furious. She is French, and we believe an orphan, because no one comes to see her, though she has letters now and then, which she hides under her pillow,” Cricket concluded almost spitefully, since curiosity was one of her leading traits.

On her way back home, oddly enough, Betty found her attention divided between two subjects. The first was natural enough; she was greatly pleased with her morning's experience. Perhaps, if she could interest her new acquaintances in forming a Camp Fire, her winter need not be an altogether unhappy and dissatisfied one.

There had been a definite reason for her leaving Woodford, which she hoped was known to no one but herself. It had been making her very unhappy, but now she intended rising above it if possible. Of course, work in which she felt an interest was the best possible cure; there was no use in preaching such a transparent philosophy as Esther had earlier in the day. But she had no inclination toward pursuing a definite career such as Sylvia, Nan and Polly had chosen. The money Judge Maynard had left her relieved her from this necessity. But the name of Polly immediately set her thinking along the second direction. What was it in the unfortunate child at the hospital that had brought Polly so forcibly before her mind? There was no definite resemblance between them, only a line here and there in the face or a slight movement. Could Polly even be conscious of the girl's existence? For Betty felt that there were many unexplainable forms of mental telegraphy by which one might communicate a thought to a friend closely in sympathy with one's own nature. 81

But by this time, as she was within a few feet of Esther's and Dick's home, Betty smiled to herself. She had merely become interested in this particular child because she seemed more unfortunate and less content than the others and she meant to do what she could to help her, no matter what her personal attitude might be. As for Polly's influence in the matter, it of course amounted to nothing. Was she not always wondering what had become of her best-loved friend and hoping she might soon be taken into her confidence?

82

## CHAPTER VIII—Afternoon Tea and a Mystery

83

Ten days later, returning from another of her now regular visits to the hospital, Betty Ashton was surprised by hearing voices inside the living room just as she was passing the closed door. Possibly Esther had invited some of their new acquaintances in to tea and had forgotten to mention it. Now she could hear her own name being called.

Her hair had been blown in every direction by the east wind and she had been sitting on the floor at the hospital, building a camp fire in the old chimney place, with the grate removed, according to the most approved camping methods. Straightening her hat and rubbing her face for an instant with her handkerchief, Betty made a casual entrance into the room, trying to assume an agreeable society manner to make up for her other deficiencies.

It was five o'clock and growing dark, although as yet the lights were not on. Esther was sitting at a little round wicker table pouring tea and Meg, who had evidently lately arrived, was standing near waiting to receive her cup. But in the largest chair in the room with her back turned to the opening door was a figure that made Betty's heart behave in the most extraordinary fashion. The hair was so black, the figure so graceful that for the moment it seemed it could only be one person—Polly! Betty's welcome was no less spontaneous, however, when *Mollie* O'Neill, jumping up, ran quickly toward her.

84

"No, I am not Polly, Betty dear! I only wish I were, for then we should at least know what had become of her. But Esther has asked me to spend Christmas with you and I hope you are half as glad to see me as I am to be with you."

Half an hour later, Esther having disappeared to see about dinner as Meg was also to remain for the night, the three old friends dropped down on sofa cushions before the fire, Camp Fire fashion, and with the tea pot between them began talking all at the same time.

85

"Do, do tell me everything about Woodford," Betty demanded. "I never shall love any place half so well as my native town and I have not heard a word except through letters, for ages."

Ceasing her own questioning of Meg in regard to the pleasures of college life, Mollie at once turned her serious blue eyes upon her other friend. "Haven't heard of Woodford, Betty!" she exclaimed, "what on earth do you mean? Then what *do you* and Anthony Graham talk about when he comes to Boston? I know he has been here twice lately, because he told me so himself and said you were well."

Suddenly in Esther's pretty sitting room all conversation abruptly ended and only the ticking of the clock could be heard. Fortunately the room was still in shadow, for unexpectedly Meg's cheeks had turned scarlet, as she glanced toward the window with a perfectly unnecessary expression of unconcern. But Betty did not change color nor did her gray eyes falter for an instant from those of her friend. Yet before she received her answer Mollie was conscious that she must in some fashion have said the wrong thing.

86

Yet what could have been the fault with her question? It was a perfectly natural one, as Betty and Anthony had always been extremely intimate in the old days, ever since Anthony had lived for a year at Mrs. Ashton's house. Mollie appreciated the change in the atmosphere, the coldness and restraint that had not been there before. Naturally she would have preferred to change the subject before receiving a reply, but she had not the quickness and adaptability of many girls, perhaps because she was too simple and sincere herself.

"Anthony Graham does not come to see me—us, Mollie," Betty corrected herself, "when he makes his visits to Boston these days. You see he is now Meg's friend more than mine. But you must remember, Mollie dear, that Meg has always had more admirers than the rest of us and now she is a full-fledged college girl, of course she is irresistible."

Betty Ashton spoke without the least suggestion of anger or envy and yet Meg turned reproachfully toward her. Her usually gay and friendly expression had certainly changed, she seemed embarrassed and annoyed.

87

"You know that isn't true, Princess, and never has been," Meg returned, rumpling her pretty yellow hair as she always did in any kind of perplexity or distress. "I never have even dreamed of being so charming as you are. You know that John has always said——"

Alas, if only Polly O'Neill had been present Mollie might in some fashion have been persuaded not to speak at this unlucky instant! But Polly had always cruelly called her an "*enfant terrible*." Now Mollie was too puzzled to appreciate the situation and so determined to get at the bottom of it.

"But does Anthony come to see you and not Betty?" Mollie demanded inexorably of the embarrassed girl.

Meg nodded. "Yes, but it is only because Betty——"

"Please don't try to offer any explanation, Meg, I would rather you would not. It is most unnecessary," Betty now interrupted gently, in a tone that few persons in her life had ever opposed. Then, reaching over, she began pouring out fresh cups of tea for her friends. "You need not worry, Mollie, Anthony and I are perfectly good friends. We have not quarreled, only he has not so much time these days now he is getting to be such a distinguished person. But do tell me whether you have the faintest idea of what Polly O'Neill is doing, or where she is, or a single solitary thing about her?"

88

Always Mollie's attention could be distracted by any mention of her sister's name and it may be that Betty was counting upon this. For Meg had gotten up and strolled over toward the window, leaving the two other girls comparatively alone.

Bluer and more serious than ever grew Mollie's big, innocent eyes.

"Polly is well, or at least says she is. That much mother confides in me," Mollie replied soberly. "But where Polly is or what she is doing I have no more idea than you have, not so much perhaps. You were always better at understanding her than I have ever been. But then even Miss Adams has never heard a line from Polly since she told her good-by in New York several months ago. By the way, Betty, Miss Adams and Mr. Hunt are going to be playing here in Boston during the holidays. Won't you and Esther ask them to your Christmas dinner party?"

89

Betty at this moment got up from the floor. "Yes, I have seen the notices of their coming and I am glad. We can have an almost home Christmas, can't we?" Then she walked over toward the window where Meg had continued standing, gazing with no special interest out into the street. The high wind was still blowing and with it occasional flurries of wet snow.

"Do let us draw down the blinds, Meg, it is getting late and is not very cheerful outside." With apparent unconsciousness Betty slipped an arm about her friend's waist and for another instant they both stared out into the almost deserted street.

Across on the farther sidewalk some one was standing, as though waiting for a companion. Meg had seen the person before but with no special attention. She was too deeply engaged with her own thoughts. Betty was differently influenced, for the figure had an oddly pathetic and lonely attitude. She could not see the face and the moment she began closing the living-room curtain the figure walked away.

90

Meg chose this same instant for giving her friend a sudden ardent embrace and Betty's attention would in any case have been distracted.

With the lights under the rose-colored shades now glowing, and Mollie asking no more embarrassing questions, the atmosphere of the living room soon grew cheerful again. For Mollie had a great deal of Woodford news to tell. Eleanor Meade was getting a beautiful trousseau for her marriage with Frank Wharton in the spring and she and Mollie had been sewing together almost every day. Eleanor had given up her old ambition to become a celebrated artist and was using her taste for color and design in the preparation of her clothes. Frank was in business with his father and would have a good deal of money, and although Eleanor's family was poor she did not intend to have less in her trousseau than other girls. Her own skill and work should make up for it.

91

Billy Webster was succeeding better each month with the management of his farm since his father's death. Now and then Mollie went to call on Mrs. Webster and not long ago she and Billy had walked out to Sunrise cabin. The little house was in excellent condition, although no one had lived in it for several years.

"It is wonderfully kind," Mollie explained, "but Billy has his own men look after our cabin and make any repairs that are necessary. He even keeps the grass cut and the weeds cleared from about the place, so any one of us could go out there to live with only a few hours preparation," she ended with her usual happy smile.

For Mollie O'Neill was not self-conscious and did not guess for a moment that while she talked both Betty and Meg were engaged with the same thought. Was there still nothing more between Mollie and Billy than simple friendliness? Once they had believed that there might be something, but now the time was passing and they were both free, Mollie at home helping her mother with the house, Billy the head of his own farm, and yet nothing had happened. Well, possibly nothing ever would and they might always simply remain friends, until one or the other married some one else.

92

Suddenly Mollie started and her color faded.

"I am awfully sorry, Betty, I know how silly and nervous you and Polly used always to think me, but look, please!" She spoke under her breath and pointed toward the closed blind.

There, sharply defined, was the shadow of a head apparently straining to see inside the room. It had the effect of a gray silhouette.

The two other girls also changed color, for the effect was uncanny. Then Betty laughed somewhat nervously.

"It must be Dick, of course, trying to frighten us, but how silly and unlike him!" She then walked

as quickly and quietly toward the window as possible and without a sign or word of warning drew up the curtain. Some one must have instantly jumped backward, for by the time Mollie and Meg had also reached the window they could only catch the outline of a disappearing figure. It was not possible in the darkness to decide whether it was a girl or a young boy.

"Well, it wasn't Dick anyhow," said Betty finally; "probably some child. However it might be just as well to go and tell Dick and Esther. They would not enjoy a sneak thief carrying off their pretty wedding presents. And besides it is time for us to get ready for dinner and I haven't yet had time to tell you about my new Camp Fire."

## CHAPTER IX—Preparations

A few mornings afterwards a letter was handed to Betty Ashton at the breakfast table, bearing a type-written address. Carelessly opening it under the impression that it must be a printed circular she found three lines, also type-written, on a sheet of paper and with no signature. It read:

"Show whatever kindness is possible to the little French girl, Angelique, at the hospital. Pardon her peculiarities and oblige a friend."

Without a comment Betty immediately passed the letter to Mollie O'Neill, who then gave it to Esther. Esther turned it over to Dr. Ashton, who frowned and straightway ceased eating his breakfast.

"I don't like anonymous letters, Betty, even if they seem to be perfectly harmless and have the best intentions. Besides, who knows of your going to the hospital except our few intimate friends? I wonder if this queer child you have spoken of could be responsible for this letter herself. One never knows!"

Rather irritably Betty shook her head. "What an absurd supposition, Dick. In the first place the child dislikes me so that she will scarcely speak to me while I am at the hospital. She seems to like Mollie a great deal better. Moreover, she is the only one of the group of girls I made friends with who still refuses to come into our Camp Fire. If she wished my friendship she might at least begin by being civil."

Always as in former days Esther was quick to interpose between any chance of a heated argument between Dick and his sister. Understanding this they both usually laughed at her efforts. For as long as they lived Dick would scold Betty when he believed her in the wrong, while she would protest and then follow his advice or discard it as seemed wisest.

"But, Betty dear, don't you consider that there is a possibility that this Angelique may have spoken to some relative or friend of your visits to the hospital, who has written you this letter in consequence. You see, they may think of you as very wealthy," Esther now suggested.

But before Betty could reply, Mollie O'Neill, who during the moment's discussion had been thinking the question over quietly, turned her eyes on her friend.

"Have you any idea who has written you, Betty?" she queried.

For no explainable reason Betty flushed. Then with entire honesty she answered, "Of course not." Surely the idea that had come into her mind was too absurd to give serious consideration.

"By the way, I wonder what I could be expected to do for Angelique?" Betty inquired the next instant, showing that her letter had not failed to make an impression, no matter if it were anonymous. "She has the best kind of care at the hospital; only she seems desperately unhappy over something and won't tell any one what it is. I know, of course, that she is ill, but the matron tells me she is not suffering and the other girls seem quite different. They are as brave and gay as if there were nothing the matter. Cricket is the best sport I ever knew."

Dr. Ashton got up from the table, leaning over to kiss Esther good-by.

"Well, don't do anything rash, Lady Bountiful," he protested to Betty. "Who knows but you may decide to adopt the little French girl before the day is over just because of a mysterious letter. I must confess I am extremely glad Judge Maynard's will only permits you to spend your income or you would keep things lively for all of us. I've an idea that it must have been Anthony Graham who put Judge Maynard up to making that kind of will. He must have remembered how you insisted on thrusting your money upon him at your first meeting and wished to save you from other impostors."

Dick was laughing and it was perfectly self-evident that he was only saying what he had to tease his sister. For surely the Princess' generousities had been a joke among her family and friends ever since she was a little girl. And she was still in the habit of rescuing every forlorn person she saw, often with somewhat disastrous results to herself.

Betty jumped up quickly from her place at the table, her face suddenly grown white and her lips trembling.

"I won't have you say things like that to me, Dick," she returned angrily. "Anthony Graham had nothing in the world to do with the money Judge Maynard gave me, he has told you a hundred

times he had not. But just the same I won't have you call him an impostor. Just because you don't approve of me is no reason why you should—" But finding her voice no longer steady Betty started hastily for the door, only to feel her brother's arms about her holding her so close she could not move while he stared closely at her downcast face.

"What is the matter, Betty?" he asked quite seriously now. "It isn't in the least like you to get into a temper over nothing. You know perfectly well that while all of us may reproach you for being so generous we would not have you different for anything in the world. As for my thinking Anthony Graham an impostor, the thing is too absurd for any comment. You know he is my friend and one of the cleverest fellows in New Hampshire. Some day he will be a Senator at Washington, but I don't think he'll mind even then remembering who gave him his start. When he comes here at Christmas I mean to ask him and to tell him you thought it necessary to defend him against me."

But by this time Betty had managed to pull herself away from Dick's clasp. "If you speak my name to him I shall never forgive you as long as I live," she announced and this time managed to escape from the room.

Utterly mystified Dick Ashton gazed at his wife.

"What on earth!" he began helplessly. And Esther nodded at Mollie.

"Won't you find Betty?" she asked.

Mollie had already risen, but she did not go at once in search of her friend, for although Mollie O'Neill may not have had as much imagination as certain other girls she had a sympathy that perhaps served even better.

Out into the hall Esther followed her husband, and after helping him into his overcoat she stood for an instant with her hand resting on his shoulder. In spite of the change in her circumstances and in spite of her own talent and Dick's adoration there was never a day when Esther was not in her heart of hearts both humble and deeply puzzled by her husband's ardent affection. Of course neither he nor Betty ever allowed her to disparage herself these days, but that had not changed the essential elements in Esther's lovely nature.

"Dick, don't try to understand," she now said. "I don't think we have exactly the right. Anthony and Betty were friends once, you know, and you were desperately afraid they might be something more. Well, I don't think there is anything between them any longer; whether they have quarreled or not is exactly what I don't know. Only if Betty should want to do any special thing for this little French girl, please don't oppose her. It would be an interest for her and you know we don't want her to spend her money on us. She will, you know, if she has any idea that there is anything either of us wish that we cannot afford to get. Already she says that she is determined to be an old maid so that her money can go to—"

Esther blushed but could not have finished her speech as her husband's kiss at this instant made it impossible.

Dick turned to go, but came back almost immediately.

"See here, Esther, I would not think of interfering with any sensible thing the Princess may wish to do with her money. I only can't let her be reckless. But about Anthony Graham. If you think he has treated Betty badly or hurt her feelings, or goodness knows what, well I won't stand it for a single little instant. He will have to hear what I think of him—"

Positively Esther could feel herself turning pale with horror at her husband's remark, but fortunately she had the good sense to laugh.

"Richard Ashton," she said, "I am not often firm with you, but if you ever dare—Oh goodness, was there ever anything on earth quite so stupid as a man can be! No matter what may or may not have happened between Betty and Anthony there is nothing that you or I can do or say. You know we interfered as hard as we possibly could with Betty's German lover. We must leave the poor child to manage some of her own affairs alone. Anthony seems to be devoting himself to Meg these days. But he will be in Boston at Christmas, so perhaps if it is only a quarrel that has come between them they may make it up. But how do you suppose I am ever going to be able to get through with all my Christmas church music and give a dinner party with Miss Adams and Mr. Hunt present and perhaps have Betty's Camp Fire girls here for an afternoon? The child has some scheme or other of taking them for a drive so that they may be able to see the Christmas decorations and then bringing them home for a party."

"If it is going to tire you, Esther, we will cut it all out," was Dr. Ashton's final protest as he disappeared to begin his morning's work. Dick had been taken into partnership with an older physician and his office was several blocks away.

At his departure Esther breathed a sigh of relief. At least by dwelling on her own difficulties she had taken his mind away from Betty's odd mood. She did not understand her sister herself, but certainly she must be left alone.

Late that afternoon when Betty and Mollie had been doing some Christmas shopping in Boston and were sitting side by side on the car, Betty whispered unexpectedly:

"See here, Mollie, do you think by any chance it is possible that Polly O'Neill could have written me that letter about the little French girl? Yes, I realize the question sounds as though I had lost my mind, as Polly may be in South America for all I know. Besides, the child never heard of Polly until I mentioned her in talking of our old club. But somehow, for a reason I can't even try to explain, I keep thinking of Polly these days as if there was something she wanted me to do and

yet did not exactly know how to ask it of me. It used often to be like that, you know, Mollie, when we were younger. Polly and I could guess what was in the other's mind. We often made a kind of game of it, just for fun. Anyhow you will have to try and see what is making that poor child so miserable, as she seems to like you better than she does me. Perhaps it is because you are so like Polly."

104

Quietly Mollie nodded. Of course Betty was absurd in her supposition; yet, as always, she was perfectly willing to help in any practical way that either her erratic sister or Betty suggested.

## CHAPTER X—More Puzzles

105

On Christmas eve Mollie and Betty each received notes written and signed by Polly herself, postmarked New York City, accompanying small gifts. Neither letter made any direct reference to what Polly herself was doing nor showed that she had any knowledge of what was interesting her sister or friend. Her information in regard to Mollie's presence in Boston, she explained, had been received from her mother.

Well, of course, it was good news to hear that at least Polly was alive and not altogether forgetful of her old affections, yet there was no other satisfaction in the communications from her. Indeed the two letters were much alike and on reading her own each girl felt much the same emotion. They were loving enough and almost gay, yet the love did not seem accompanied by any special faith to make it worth while, nor did the gayety sound altogether sincere.

106

Betty's merely said:

"My Christmas thought is with you now and always, dear Princess. Trust me and love me if you can. You may not approve of what I am doing, but some day I shall try to explain it to you. I can't ask you to write me unless you will send the letter to Mother and she will forward it. Do nothing rash, dear Princess, Betty, friend, while I am not near to look after you. Your always devoted Polly."

With a little laugh that was not altogether a cheerful one, Betty also turned this letter over to Mollie. The two girls were in Betty's bedroom with no one else present.

"Like Polly, wasn't it, to tell me not to do anything rash when she was not around to run things?" Betty said with a shrug of her shoulders and a little arching of her delicate brows.

Mollie looked at her admiringly. Betty had not seemed altogether as she used to be in the first few days after her arrival, but recently, with the coming of the holidays and the arrival of their old friends, she certainly was as pretty as ever. Now she had on an ancient blue silk dressing gown which was an especial favorite and her red-brown hair was loose over her shoulders. The two friends were resting after a strenuous day. In a few hours Esther was to give her first real dinner party and they had all been working together toward the great event.

107

"But why should Polly warn you against rashness under any circumstances?" Mollie returned, after having glanced over the note. "You are not given to doing foolish things as she is. I suppose because Polly is so dreadfully rash herself she believes the same of other people."

There was no answer at first except that the Princess settled herself more deeply in her big Morris chair. Mollie was lying on the bed near by. Then she laughed again.

"Oh, you need not be so sure of my good sense, Mavourneen, as Polly used to call you. I may not be rash in the same way that old Pollykins is, perhaps because I have not the same courage, yet I may not be so far away from it as you think. Only I wish Polly found my society as necessary to her happiness as hers is to mine. I simply dread the thought of a Christmas without her, and yet she is probably having a perfectly blissful time somewhere with never a thought of us."

108

Hearing a sudden knock at their door at this instant Mollie tumbled off the bed to answer it. Yet not before she had time to reply, "I am not so sure Polly is as happy as you think." Then the little maid standing outside in the hall thrust into her arms four boxes of flowers.

Nearly breathless with excitement Mollie immediately dropped them all into her friend's lap.

"See what a belle you are, Betty Ashton!" she exclaimed. "Here you are almost a stranger in Boston and yet being showered with attentions."

Gravely Betty read aloud the address on the first box.

"Miss Mollie O'Neill, care of Dr. Richard Ashton," she announced, extending the package to the other girl with a mock solemnity and then laughing to see Mollie's sudden blush and change of expression. A moment later the second box, also inscribed with Mollie's name, was presented her. But the final two were addressed to Betty, so that the division was equal.

109

It was Mollie, however, who first untied the silver cord that bound the larger of her two boxes, and Betty was quite sure that the roses inside were no pinker or prettier than her friend's cheeks.

"They are from Billy," Mollie said without any hesitation or pretense of anything but pleasure. "He says that he has sent a great many so that I may wear them tonight and tomorrow and then

again tomorrow night to the dance, as I care for pink roses more than any flower. It was good of Meg to ask Billy to come over for her College holiday dance. I should have been dreadfully embarrassed with one of Meg's strange Harvard friends for my escort. And Billy says he would have been abominably lonely in Woodford with all of us away."

Mollie's second gift was a bunch of red and white carnations, bearing Anthony Graham's card. "How kind of Anthony to remember me," she protested, "when he was never a special friend of mine. But of course he sent me the flowers because I happened to be yours and Esther's guest and he is coming here to dinner tonight with Meg. But do please be less slow and let me see what you have received."

For almost reluctantly Betty Ashton seemed to be opening her gifts. Nevertheless she could not conceal a quick cry of admiration at what she saw first. The box was an oblong purple one tied with gold ribbon. But here at Christmastide, in the midst of Boston's cold and dampness, lay a single great bunch of purple violets and another of lilies of the valley. Hurriedly Betty picked up the card that lay concealed beneath them. Just as Mollie's had, it bore Anthony Graham's name, and formal good wishes, but something else as well which to any one else would have appeared an absurdity. For it was a not very skilful drawing of a small ladder with a boy at the foot of it.

"Gracious, it must be true that John is making a fortune in his broker shop in Wall Street, as Meg assures me!" Betty exclaimed gayly the next moment, thrusting her smaller box of flowers away, to peep into the largest of the four offerings. "I did not realize John had yet arrived in Boston, Meg was not sure he would be able to be with her for the holidays. It is kind of him, I am sure, to remember me, isn't it Mollie? And there is not much danger of my being unable to wear John's flowers with any frock I have, he has sent such a variety. I believe I'll use the mignonette tonight, it is so fragrant and unconventional."

Betty spoke almost sentimentally and this state of mind was so unusual to her that for a moment Mollie only stared in silence. However, as her friend disappeared into the bathroom to begin her toilet for the evening Mollie remarked placidly, "The violets would look ever so much prettier with your blue dress."

Esther's round mahogany table seated exactly twelve guests. On her right was Richard Hunt, the actor, with Anthony Graham on her left, next him was Meg, then Billy Webster and Mollie O'Neill. To the right of Dr. Ashton, Margaret Adams had the place of honor, then came a Harvard law student who was a special admirer of Meg's, then a new friend of Esther's and then John Everett and Betty Ashton. As the entire arrangement of the company had been made through Betty's suggestion, doubtless she must have chosen the companions at dinner that she most desired. Polly's friend, Richard Hunt, sat on her other side with Meg and Anthony nearly opposite.

There had been no lack of cordiality on Betty's part toward any one of their visitors. On Anthony's arrival with Meg Everett she had thanked him for his gift in her most charming manner, but had made no reference to the card which he had enclosed nor to the fact that she preferred wearing other flowers than his. Meg was looking unusually pretty tonight and very frankly Betty told her so. Her soft blond hair was parted on the side with a big loose coil at the back and a black velvet ribbon encircled her head. Professor Everett was not wealthy and Meg's college education was costing him a good deal, therefore she had ordinarily only a moderate sum of money for buying her clothes and no special talent for making the best of them. However, this evening her dress had been a Christmas gift from her brother John and, as it was of soft white silk and lace, particularly becoming to Meg's pretty blondness. Her blue eyes were shining with a kind of veiled light and her color came and went swiftly. She seemed just as ingenuous and impulsive as she had ever been, until it was difficult to know what must be the truth about her. Several times during the evening Esther told herself sternly that of course Meg had a perfect right to accept Anthony Graham's attentions if she liked, for there had never been any definite understanding between him and her sister, and indeed that she had disapproved of him in the past. Yet now Anthony Graham, in spite of his origin, might have been considered a good match for almost any girl. He was a distinguished looking fellow, with his brilliant foreign coloring, his dark hair and high forehead. Esther recalled having once felt keenly sorry for him because the other girls and young men in their group of friends had not considered him their social or intellectual equal. Now he was entirely self-possessed and sure of himself. Yet he did seem almost too grave for their happy Betty; possibly it was just as well he had transferred his interest to Meg. No one could ever succeed in making Meg Everett serious for any great length of time. She was still the same happy-go-lucky girl of their old Camp Fire days whom "a higher education" was not altering in the least. Yet the "higher education" may have given her subjects of conversation worthy of discussing with Anthony, for certainly they spent a great part of the time talking in low tones to each other.

Betty appeared in the gayest possible spirits and had never looked prettier. Richard Hunt seemed delighted with her, and John Everett had apparently returned to the state of admiration which he had always felt when they had been boy and girl together in Woodford. Indeed Betty did feel unusually animated and excited; she could hardly have known why except that she had spent a rather dull winter and that she was extremely excited at seeing her old friends again. And then she and Mr. Hunt had so much to say to each other on a subject that never failed to be interesting—Polly!

Neither he nor Miss Adams had the faintest idea of what had become of that erratic young person, although Margaret Adams had also received a Christmas letter from her. But where she was or what she was doing, no one had the faintest idea. It was evident that Mr. Hunt highly disapproved of Polly's proceedings, and although until the instant before Betty had felt exactly as

he did, now she rallied at once to her friend's defense.

"Mr. Hunt, you must not think for an instant that Polly was ungrateful either to Miss Adams or to you for your many kindnesses, only she had to do things in her own Polly fashion, one that other people could not exactly understand. But if one had ever been fond of Polly," Betty insisted, "you were apt to keep on caring for her for some reason or other which you could not exactly explain. Not that Polly was as pretty or perhaps as sweet as Mollie."

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Several times during the evening Betty had noticed that every now and then her companion had glanced with interest toward Mollie O'Neill. However, when he now agreed with her last statement; she was not sure whether his agreement emphasized the fact of Mollie's superior prettiness, or that Polly was an unforgettable character.

Without a doubt Esther's and Dick's first formal dinner party was a pronounced success. The food was excellent, the two maids, one of whom was hired for the occasion, served without a flaw. There was only one trifling occurrence that might have created a slight disturbance, and this situation fortunately Betty Ashton saw in time to save.

She happened to be sitting at the side of the table that faced the windows. Earlier in the evening one of these windows had been opened in order to cool the room and the curtain left partly up. The wind was not particularly high and no one seemed to be inconvenienced. But most unexpectedly toward the close of the dinner a gale must have sprung up. Because there was a sudden, sharp noise at the window and without warning the blind rolled itself to the topmost ledge with startling abruptness, as if some one had pulled sharply at the cord and then let go.

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Then another noise immediately followed, not so startling but far more puzzling. The first racket had caused every member of the little company to start instinctively. Then at the same instant, before Richard Ashton, who chanced to be pouring a glass of water for Margaret Adams, could get up from his place, Betty turned to Richard Hunt. John Everett happened to be talking to his other neighbor at the moment.

"Mr. Hunt," Betty asked quickly, "won't you please close that window for us? It is too cold to have it open and besides one does not altogether like the idea that outside persons might be able to look into the room."

Perhaps Richard Hunt was just a moment longer at the window in the performance of so simple a task than one might have expected, but no one observed it.

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As he took his place again and Betty thanked him she looked at him with a slight frown.

"Did you see a ghost, Mr. Hunt?" she queried. "It is not a comfortable night even for a ghost to be prowling about. It is too lonely an occupation for Christmas eve."

Richard Hunt smiled at his companion in return. "Oh, I am always seeing ghosts, Miss Ashton," he answered; "I suppose it is because I have an actor's vivid imagination."

## CHAPTER XI—A Christmas Song and Recognition

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The entire number of guests who had been together at Esther's and Dick Ashton's Christmas-eve dinner, agreed to be at church the following morning in order to hear Esther sing.

In spite of the fact that Boston is one of the most musical of American cities and Esther the most modest of persons, even in so short a time her beautiful voice had given her an enviable reputation. The papers in giving notice of the morning service had mentioned the fact that the solo would be given by Mrs. Richard Ashton. But church music must have been Esther's real vocation, for no matter how large the congregation nor how difficult her song she never felt any of her old nervousness and embarrassment. For one thing she was partly hidden behind the choir screen, so she need not fear that critical eyes were upon her; she could be alone with her music and something that was stronger and higher than herself.

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On Christmas morning Betty entered their pew with her brother Dick, Mollie O'Neill and Billy Webster. She was wearing a dark green broadcloth with a small black velvet toque on her red-brown hair and a new set of black fox furs that her brother and sister had given her that morning for a Christmas present. She was pale and a little tired from yesterday's festivities, so that a single red rose which had come to her from some unknown source that morning, was the only really bright color about her except for the lights in her hair. Mollie was flushed and smiling with the interest in the new place and people and the companionship of tried friends.

Betty thought that Margaret Adams also seemed weary when she came in with Mr. Hunt a few moments later. She was glad that the great lady happened to be placed next her so that she might feel the thrill of her nearness. For genius is thrilling, no matter how simple and unpretentious the man or woman who possesses it. Margaret Adams wore a wonderful long Russian sable coat and a small velvet hat and, just as naturally as if she had been another girl, slipped her hand into Betty's and held it during the service.

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So that in spite of her best efforts Betty could not keep her attention from wandering now and then. She knew that Margaret Adams was almost equally as devoted to Polly O'Neill as she herself and wondered what she thought of their friend's conduct. She wished that they might



have the opportunity to talk the matter over before Miss Adams finished her stay in Boston. Then, though realizing her own bad manners, Betty could not help being a little curious over the friendship between Miss Adams and Mr. Hunt. They seemed to have known each other such a long, long time and to have acted together so many times. Of course Margaret Adams was several years older, but that scarcely mattered with so unusual a person.

Moreover, there were other influences at work to keep Betty Ashton's mind from being as firmly fixed upon the subject of the morning's sermon as it should have been. For was she not conscious of the presence of Meg and John Everett and Anthony Graham in the pew just back of her? And though it did seem vain and self-conscious of her, she had the sensation that at least two pairs of eyes were frequently concentrated upon the back of her head or upon her profile should she chance to turn her face half way around.

When the offertory was finally announced and Esther began the first lines of her solo, not only was her sister Betty's attention caught and held, but that of almost every other human being in the church. It was not a beautiful Christmas day, outside there were scurrying gray clouds and a kind of bleak coldness. But the church was warmly and beautifully lighted, the altar white with lilies and crimson with roses, speaking of passion and peace. And Esther's voice had in it something of almost celestial sweetness. She was no longer a girl but a woman, for Dick's love and a promise of a fulfilment equally beautiful had added to her natural gift a deeper emotional power. And she sang one of the simplest and at the same time one of the most beautiful of Christmas hymns.

Betty was perfectly willing to allow all the unhappiness and disappointments of the past few months to relieve themselves in the tears that came unchecked. Then she saw Margaret Adams bite her lips and close her eyes as if she too were shutting out the world of ordinary vision to live only in beautiful sound and a higher communion.

"Hark! the herald angels sing  
Glory to the new-born King;  
Peace on earth, and mercy mild,  
God and sinners reconciled!  
Joyful, all ye nations, rise,  
Join the triumph of the skies;  
With the angelic host proclaim,  
Christ is born in Bethlehem.  
Hark! the herald angels sing  
Glory to the new-born King.

"Christ, by highest heaven adored;  
Christ, the everlasting Lord;  
Late in time behold Him come,  
Offspring of a virgin's womb.  
Veil'd in flesh the Godhead see,  
Hail, th' Incarnate Deity!  
Pleased as man with man to dwell,  
Jesus, our Emmanuel!  
Hark! the herald angels sing  
Glory to the new-born King.

"Hail, the heaven-born Prince of Peace!  
Hail, the Sun of righteousness!  
Light and life to all He brings,  
Risen with healing in His wings.  
Mild He lays His glory by,  
Born that man no more may die;  
Born to raise the sons of earth,  
Born to give them second birth.  
Hark! the herald angels sing  
Glory to the new-born King."

At the close of the service, turning to leave the church, Betty Ashton felt a hand laid on her arm, and glancing up in surprise found Anthony Graham's eyes gazing steadfastly into hers.

"We are friends, are we not, Betty? You would not let any misunderstanding or any change in your life alter that?" he asked hurriedly.

For just an instant the girl hesitated, then answered simply and gracefully:

"I don't think any one could be unfaithful to an old friendship on Christmas morning after hearing Esther sing. It was not in the least necessary, Anthony, for you to ask me such a question. You know I shall always wish you the best possible things."

Then, without allowing the young man to reply or to accompany her down the aisle, she hurried away to her other friends, and, slipping her arm firmly inside Mollie O'Neill's, she never let go her clasp until they were safely out of church.

"It is no use, Meg, nothing matters," Anthony Graham said a quarter of an hour later, when he and Margaret Everett were on their way home together, John having deserted them to join the other party. "The fact is, Betty does not care in the least one way or the other what I say or do."

"Then I wish you would let me tell her the truth," Meg urged. "You see, Anthony, the Princess and I have always been such intimate friends and I have always admired her more than any of the other girls. I don't wish her to misunderstand us. She may not be so brilliant as Polly, nor so clever as Sylvia or your sister Nan, but somehow Betty is—well, I suppose she is what a real Princess ought to be. That is what Polly always declared. It is not just because she is pretty and generous, but she is so high-minded. Nothing would make *her* even appear to take advantage of a friend." And Meg sighed, her usually happy face clouding.

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In silence, then, the girl and young man walked on for a few moments when Anthony replied: "You must do as you like, of course, Meg. I have no right to ask you anything else. But this understanding between us means everything in the world to me and it was your own offer in the beginning."

Meg nodded. "Yes, I know; but truly I don't think as much of my idea as I did at first. Still I am willing to keep quiet for a while longer if you wish it."

At this moment there was no further opportunity for intimate conversation, for Meg's Harvard friend, Ralph Brown, made his appearance with a five-pound box of candy, elaborately tied with red ribbon, under his arm, and an expression on his face that suggested politely but firmly that Anthony Graham retire for the present, leaving the field to him.

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Of their friends in Boston only Margaret Adams and Richard Hunt had been invited by Esther and Dr. Ashton to have an informal Christmas dinner with them. For the dinner party the evening before had been such a domestic strain upon the little household that they wished to spend the following day quietly. But it was impossible to think of Margaret Adams dining alone in a great hotel, and she would certainly accept no invitation from her wealthier and more fashionable acquaintances in Boston. Moreover, Betty hoped that in the afternoon there might be a chance to talk of Polly. At the beginning no one had dreamed of including Richard Hunt in the invitation, as he was a comparative stranger; but Dick, having taken a sudden fancy to him, had calmly suggested his returning for Christmas day without due consultation with his family.

Five minutes after starting for home with Dick and Esther, Mollie, Betty and Miss Adams, Mr. Hunt, with a murmured excuse which no one understood, asked to be excused from going further. He would join the party later if possible, but should he chance to be delayed dinner must on no account be kept waiting for him.

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His conduct did seem rather extraordinary, and although Dick and Esther betrayed no surprise, it was plain enough that Margaret Adams felt annoyed. She had introduced Mr. Hunt to her friends and so naturally felt responsible for his conduct.

Though the man was aware of his apparent eccentricity and though his manners were usually nearly perfect, he now deliberately turned away from the little company. And in spite of his half-hearted suggestion of re-joining them he had little idea at present of when he would return. Deliberately he retraced his steps to the church which he had quitted only a few moments before.

Already the place was nearly deserted. On the sidewalk the clergyman was saying farewell to a few final members of his congregation, while inside the sexton was closing the doors of the two side aisles, although the large door in the center still remained open. Hurriedly Mr. Hunt entered. And there, just as he had hoped to find her, was the figure of a girl sitting in a rather dejected attitude in one of the last pews. She had on a dark dress and a heavy long coat and about her head a thick veil was tied.

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Before he could reach her she had risen and was starting away.

"Wait here for a moment, Miss O'Neill; we can find no other spot so quiet in which to have a talk," the man said sternly.

Then as Polly flashed an indignant glance at him, attempting to pass as though she had neither seen nor recognized him, he added:

"I know I have no right to intrude upon you, but unless you are willing to give me some explanation of why you are here and what you are doing, I shall tell the friends who are nearer to you than I am of my having seen you not only this morning, but last night as well."

"Oh, please *don't!*" Polly's voice was trembling. "Really, truly, I am not doing anything wrong in staying here in Boston and not letting people hear. My mother knows where I am and what I am doing and of course I am not alone. Yes, it was utterly silly and reckless of me to have peeped in at Esther's dining-room window last night, but I was so dreadfully lonely and wanted to see everybody so much. How could I have dreamed that that wretched curtain would go banging away up in the air as it did? But anyhow, Mr. Hunt, I shall always be everlastingly grateful to you for not telling on me last night. I did not suppose you saw me and certainly never imagined you could have recognized me when I crouched down in the shadow."

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Unexpectedly Polly O'Neill laughed. "What a perfect idiot I should have looked if you had dragged me in before the dinner party like a spy or a thief or a beggar! I can just imagine Esther's and Mollie's expressions."

"Yes, but all this is not quite to the point, Miss Polly," Richard Hunt continued, speaking however in a more friendly tone. "Am I to tell Margaret Adams and Betty Ashton that I have discovered you, or will you take me into your secret and let me decide what is best to be done afterwards?"

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"But you have not the right to do either the one thing nor the other," the girl argued, lifting her veil for an instant in order to see if there was any sign of relenting in the face of her older friend.

There was not the slightest. And Polly recognized that for once in her life she was beaten.

"Don't say anything today then, please," she urged, looking into her pocketbook and finding there a card with a name and address written upon it. "But come to see me tomorrow if you like. And don't think that I am ungrateful or—or horrid," she ended abruptly, rushing away so swiftly that it would have been impossible for any one to have followed her without creating attention.

Rather grimly Richard Hunt gazed at the card he held in his hand. It bore a name that was not Polly O'Neill's and the address of a quiet street in Boston. What on the face of the earth could she be doing? It was impossible to guess, and yet it was certainly nothing very unwise if her mother knew and approved of it.

Whether or not he had the right to find out, Richard Hunt had positively decided to take advantage of his recognition of Polly O'Neill and insist upon her confidence. He could not have explained even to himself why he was so determined on this course of action. However, it was true, as her friend Betty Ashton had insisted the night before, whether or not you happened to feel a liking for Polly, you were not apt to forget her.

In the past few months it was curious how often he had found himself wondering what had become of the girl. He recalled her having run away several years before to make her first stage appearance and then their meeting in Margaret Adams' drawing room in London later on. Well, perhaps curiosity was not alone a feminine trait of character, for Richard Hunt felt convinced he would be more at peace with himself and the world when he had learned Polly's story from her own lips.

## CHAPTER XII—After Her Fashion Polly Explains

The next afternoon a dark-haired woman a little past thirty came into the boarding house sitting room to see Richard Hunt before Polly made her appearance.

"I am Mrs. Martins, Miss O'Neill's chaperon," she explained. "Or if I am not exactly her chaperon at least we are together and I am trying to see that no harm befalls her. No, she is not calling herself by her own name, but she will prefer to give you her own reason for that. I have met her mother several times, so that of course I understand the situation." Mrs. Martins was a woman of refinement and of some education and her pronunciation of her own name showed her to be of French origin.

Already the situation was slightly less mystifying. Yet there was still a great deal for Polly to make clear if she chose to do so. However, it was curious that she was taking so long a time to join them.

Mrs. Martins continued to talk about nothing in particular, so it was evident that *she* intended making no betrayals. Now and then she even glanced toward the door in some embarrassment, as though puzzled and annoyed by her companion's delay. And while Richard Hunt was answering her politely if vaguely, actually he was on the point of deciding that Polly did not intend coming down stairs at all. Well perhaps it would serve him right, for what authority did he have for forcing the girl's confession? And she was certainly quite capable of punishing him by placing him in an absurd situation.

Nevertheless nothing was farther from Polly O'Neill's intention at the present moment. She was merely standing before her mirror in her tiny upstairs bedroom trying to summon sufficient courage to meet her guest and tell her story.

Once or twice she had started for the door only to return and stare at herself with intense disapproval. She had rubbed her cheeks with a crash towel until at least they were crimson enough, although the color was not very satisfying, and she had arranged her hair three times, only to decide at the last that she had best have left it alone at first.

Now she made a little grimace at her own image, smiling at almost the same instant.

"My beloved Princess or Mollie, I do wish you could lend me your good looks for the next half hour," she murmured half aloud. "It is so much easier to be eloquent and convincing in this world when one happens to be pretty. But I, well certainly I would serve as a perfect illustration of 'a rag and a bone and a hank of hair' at this moment if at no other."

Polly glanced down at her costume with more satisfaction than she had found in surveying her face. It was not in the least shabby, but a very charming dress which her mother had sent as a part of her Christmas box. The dress was of dark red *crepe de Chine* with a velvet girdle and collar of the same shade. And although under ordinary circumstances it might have been becoming, today Polly was not wrong in believing that she was not looking even her poor best. She was tired and nervous. Of course it did not matter so very much what Mr. Hunt might think of the story she had to tell him, but later on there would be many other persons whom she would have to persuade to accept her point of view. And somehow she felt that if she failed to convince her first listener she must fail with the others.

Then unexpectedly, before hearing the sound of her approach, Richard Hunt discovered a cold hand being extended to shake his, and in a voice even more chilling Polly O'Neill was apologizing

for having kept him waiting. Yet on the way down the steps had she not positively made up her mind to be so cordial and agreeable that her visitor should forget her other deficiencies?

With a feeling of amazement mixed with despair Polly seated herself in the darkest corner of a small sofa next Mrs. Martins, deciding that it was quite useless, that she should attempt no explanation. Mr. Hunt and her companion could talk together about the weather if they chose, for she could not think of a single word to say. Afterwards her visitor could go away and give any account of her he wished, although naturally this might frustrate all her hopes and ambitions and make her dearest friends angry with her for life. Yet if one were always to suffer from stage fright at all the critical moments of one's career what else could be expected?

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At this moment Mrs. Martins excused herself and left the room. Polly saw her go with a characteristic shrug of her shoulders and an odd glance at her visitor. The moment had come. Mr. Hunt would discover that she had not even the grace to keep her promise, and heaven alone knew what he would soon think of her.

Yet after saying good-by to her companion he continued talking in the kindest possible fashion, telling her news of Esther and Dick Ashton, saying how much he admired Betty and Mollie.

Indeed in less than five minutes Polly had actually managed to forget the reason for her visitor's call and was asking him questions about her old friends, faster than they could be answered.

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"Was their play, *A Woman's Wit*, still as great a success as it had been at the start? Was Margaret Adams well or had the winter's work used her up? Did Betty Ashton seem to have any special admirer in Boston?"

Actually in a brief quarter of an hour Polly's eyes were shining and her lips smiling. Curled up comfortably on her sofa she suddenly appreciated that she was having the most agreeable time she had enjoyed in months. Then again her expression changed and her brief radiance vanished. Yet this time her companion understood.

"Miss Polly," he said quickly, "please don't feel that after what happened yesterday I still mean to force you to make a confidant of me. The truth is I did want very much to hear that all was well with you and that you were not making any kind of mistake. I am not going to be a coward, so I confess that I came here today expecting to force your secret from you simply because I had an advantage over you. But, of course, now that we have been talking together I can see that you are all right, even if you do look rather tired and none too cheerful. So I want to apologize and then I shall go away and not worry you again. Also you may feel entirely assured that I shall not mention having seen you to any one."

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The man had risen from his chair, but before he could move a step forward, Polly had clasped her hands together and was gazing at him imploringly.

"Oh, please, Mr. Hunt, don't go," she begged. "All of a sudden I have begun to feel that if I don't tell some one my secret and ask you to approve of me or at least to try to forgive me for what I am doing I shall perish." Actually Polly would now have pushed her visitor back into his chair if he had not sat down again so promptly as to make it unnecessary.

"You are sure you wish to confide in me, Miss Polly? Of course you understand that I will tell no one. But if your mother knows and approves of you, why surely no other person is necessary," he argued.

In reply the girl laughed. "Mother is an angel and for that reason perhaps she does not always approve or understand me exactly. In this case she is just permitting me to have my own way because she promised to let me try and do what I could to become a successful actress and she never goes back on her word. Of course my method seems queer to her and probably will to you. But after all it is the way I see things and one can't look out of any one's eyes but one's own. Surely you believe that, Mr. Hunt?"

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Of course any one who really understood Polly O'Neill, Betty Ashton for instance, would have understood at once that she was now beginning to explain her own wilfulness. Yet her question did sound convincing, for assuredly one can have no other vision than one's own.

Richard Hunt nodded sympathetically, although Polly was looking so absurdly young and so desperately in earnest that he would have preferred to smile.

She was leaning forward with her chin resting on her hand and gazing intently at him. What she saw was a man who seemed almost middle-aged to her. And yet to the girl he seemed almost ideally handsome. His features were strong and well-cut, the nose aquiline, the mouth large and firm. And he was wearing the kindest possible expression. For half an instant Polly's thoughts flew away from herself. Surely if any one in the world could be worthy of Margaret Adams it was Richard Hunt. Then she settled down to the telling of her own story.

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"You know of course, Mr. Hunt, without my having to say anything more about it, that ever since I was a little girl I have dreamed and hoped and prayed of some day becoming a great actress. Mother says that there was some one in my family once, one of my Irish aunts, I believe, who ran away from home in order to go on the stage and was never recognized again. I have thought sometimes that perhaps I inherited her ambition. One never knows about things like that, life is so queer. Anyhow when a dozen girls in Woodford formed a Camp Fire and we lived together in the woods for over a year working and playing, mother and Betty and my sister expected me to get over my foolish ideas and learn something through our club that might make me adopt a more sensible career. I don't mean to be rude to you, Mr. Hunt," Polly was profoundly serious,

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there was now no hint of amusement in her dark blue eyes or in her mobile face, "you understand I am only telling you what my family and friends thought about people who were actors—not what I think. I don't see why acting isn't just as great and useful as the other arts if one is conscientious and has real talent. But the trouble with me has been all along that I haven't any real talent. I suppose if I had been a genius from the first no one would have cared to oppose me. Well the Camp Fire did not influence me against what I wanted to do; it only made me feel more in earnest than I had ever been before. For we girls learned such a lot about courage and perseverance and being happy even if things were not going just the way one liked, that it has all been a great help to me recently, more than at any time in my life."

Richard Hunt nodded gravely. "I see," he said quietly, although in point of fact he did not yet understand in the least what Polly was trying to explain, nor why she should review so much of her past life before coming to her point. He was curiously interested, although ordinarily he might have been bored by such a disjointed story. 143

Polly was too intense at the moment to have bored anyone. There she sat in her red dress against the darker background of the sofa with her figure almost in shadow and the light falling only upon her odd, eager face.

"I ran away from Miss Adams and from you, not because I was such a coward that I meant to give up the thing I was trying for, but because I knew that I must have a harder time if I was ever to amount to anything. You see people were trying to make things so easy for me and in a way they were making them more difficult. Margaret gave me that place in her company when I did not deserve it; you tried to show me how to act when I could not learn; my friends were complimenting me when all the time they must have known I was a failure. I couldn't bear it, Mr. Hunt; really I could not. I am lots of horrid things, but I am not a fraud. Then Margaret told me what a difficult time she had at the beginning of her career and how no one had helped her. Of course she meant to make me feel that I might be more successful because of my friends' aid, but I did not see things just that way. Oh, I do hope you had to work dreadfully hard at the beginning of your profession and had lots of failures," Polly concluded so unexpectedly and so solemnly that this time Richard Hunt could not refrain from laughing. 144

"Oh no, it wasn't all plain sailing for me either, Miss Polly, and it isn't now for that matter, if it is of any help to you to know it," he added, realizing that his companion was absolutely unconscious of having said anything amusing.

"Before I gave up trying to act Belinda I got a small position in a cheap stock company." Polly had at last reached the point of her story. "The company has been traveling through New England all winter and is still on the road. We only happened to be in Boston during the holidays. I have been playing almost any kind of part, sometimes I am a maid, sometimes a lady-in-waiting to the queen; once or twice, when the star has been ill, I have had to take the character of the heroine. Of course all this must sound very silly and commonplace to you, Mr. Hunt, but honestly I am learning a few things: not to be so self-conscious for one thing and to work very, very hard." 145

"Too hard, Miss Polly, I am afraid," Richard Hunt replied, looking closely at his companion and feeling oddly moved by her confession. Perhaps the girl's effort would amount to nothing and perhaps she was unwise in having made it, nevertheless one could not but feel sorry that her friends had suspected her of ingratitude and lack of affection and that she was engaged in some kind of foolish escapade. Richard Hunt felt extremely guilty himself at the moment.

"Oh no, I am not working too hard or at least not too hard for my health," Polly argued. "You see both my mother and Sylvia are looking after me. Sylvia made me promise her once, when I did not understand what she meant, that I would let her know what I was doing all this winter. So I have kept my promise and every once and a while good old Sylvia travels to where I happen to be staying and looks me over and gives me pills and things." Polly smiled. "You don't know who Sylvia is and it is rather absurd of me to talk to you so intimately about my family. Sylvia is my step-sister, but she used to be merely my friend when we were girls. She is younger than I am but a thousand times cleverer and is studying to be a physician. She has not much respect for my judgment but she is rather fond of me." 146

"And your chaperon?" Perhaps Mr. Hunt realized that he was asking a good many questions when he and Polly O'Neill were still comparative strangers; yet he was too much concerned for her welfare at present to care.

Polly did not seem to be either surprised or offended by his questioning, but pleased to have some one in whom she might confide.

"Oh, just at first mother sent one of her old friends about everywhere with me. But when she got tired we found this Mrs. Martins who was having a hard time in New York and needed something to do. She is really awfully nice and is teaching me French in our spare moments. She used to be a dressmaker, I believe, but could not get enough work to do." Suddenly Polly straightened up and put out her hand this time in an exceedingly friendly fashion. 147

"Goodness, Mr. Hunt, what a dreadfully long time I have been keeping you here and how good you have been to listen to me so patiently!" she exclaimed. "You will keep my secret for me, won't you? This winter I don't want my friends to know what I am trying to do or to come to see me act. I have not improved enough so far."

Still holding Polly's hand in a friendly clasp, her visitor rose.

"But you will let me come, won't you?" he urged. "You see I am in your secret now and so I am

different from other people. Besides I am very grateful to you for your faith in me and I don't like to remember now that I first tried bullying you into confiding in me."

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Polly's answering sigh was one of relief. "I don't seem to mind even that, although I was angry and frightened at first," she returned. "I don't usually enjoy doing what people make me do. But if you think you really would like to come to see me play, perhaps I should be rather glad. Only you must promise not to let me know when you are there, nor what you think of my acting afterwards."

## CHAPTER XIII—A Place of Memories

149

"I wonder, Angel, if you had ever heard of my friend, Polly O'Neill, before I mentioned her name to you?" Betty Ashton asked after a few moments of silence between the two girls, when evidently Betty had been puzzling over this same question.

Angel shook her head. "Never," she returned quietly.

Five months had passed since their first meeting and now the scene about them was a very different one from the four bare walls of a hospital, and the little French girl was almost as completely changed.

It was early spring in the New Hampshire hills and the child and young woman were seated outside a cabin of logs with their eyes resting sometimes on a small lake before them, again on a dark group of pine trees, but more often on a sun-tipped hill ahead where the meadows seemed to lie down in green homage at her feet.

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Everywhere there were signs of the earth's eternal re-birth and re-building. The grain showed only a tiny hint of its autumn harvest of gold, but the grass, the flowers, the new leaves on the bushes and trees were at their gayest and loveliest. Notwithstanding there was a breeze cool enough to make warm clothes a necessity, and Betty wore a long dark blue cloth cloak, while her companion, who was lying at full length in a steamer chair, was covered with a heavy rug. Yet the girl's delicate white hands were busily engaged in weaving long strands of bright-colored straws together.

"Why did you think I had ever heard of your friend, Princess?" she queried after a short pause.

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"Why Did You Think I Had Ever Heard of Your Friend?"

Keeping her finger in a volume of Tennyson's poems which she had been supposed to be reading, the older girl gazed thoughtfully and yet almost unseeingly into the dark eyes of her companion. "I don't know exactly," she replied thoughtfully, "only for some strange reason since our earliest acquaintance you have always made me think of Polly. You don't look like her, of course, though there is just a suggestion in your expression now and then. Perhaps because you were so interested in her when I began telling of our Sunrise Hill Camp Fire girls. I don't believe you would ever have been able to endure me you know, Angel dear, if you had not liked hearing me

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talk of Polly; then think of what good times we should both have missed!"

Across the little French girl's face a warm flush spread.

"It is like you to say 'we' should have missed," she replied softly. "But I never hated you, you were always mistaken in believing that. From the morning you first came to the hospital and ever afterwards I thought you the prettiest person I had ever seen in my life and one of the sweetest. It was only that in those early days I was too miserable to speak to any one. Always I was afraid I should break down if I tried to talk, so when the other girls attempted being nice to me I pretended I was sullen and hateful when in reality I was a coward. It was just the same when you started the 'Shut-In Camp Fire' among the girls. I would not join, I would not take the slightest interest in the beginning for much the same reason. But you were always so patient and agreeable to me and so was Miss Mollie. Then there was always Cricket!" Smiling, she paused for a moment listening.

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Inside Sunrise cabin both girls could hear the noise of several persons moving about as though deeply engaged in some important business.

"I suppose I ought to go in and help," Betty remarked in a slightly conscience-smitten tone, "but Mollie does so enjoy fussing about getting things ready. And in spite of all my efforts and stern Camp Fire training I shall never be so good a cook as she is. Besides, both Mollie and Cricket informed me politely, after I finished cleaning our rooms and had set the luncheon table, that I was somewhat in the way. I suppose I had best go in, though. Is there anything I can do for you first, Angel? Cricket is beating that cake batter so hard it sounds like a drum."

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Betty had half risen from her chair when the expression in her companion's face made her sit down again. "What is it?" she asked.

For a moment the other girl's fingers ceased their busy weaving. "You have never asked me anything about myself, Princess, in spite of all the wonderful things you have done for me," she began. "I don't want to bore you, but I should like——"

With a low laugh Betty suddenly hunched her chair forward until it was close up against the larger one.

"And I, I am perfectly dying to hear, you must know, you dear little goose, to talk about boring me! Don't you know I am one of the most curious members of my curious sex? I have not asked you questions because I did not feel I had the right unless you wished to tell. But possibly I asked that question about Polly O'Neill just to give you a chance. Really I don't know."

In spite of this small confession, not for worlds would Betty Ashton have allowed the sensitive little French girl to have learned another reason for her questioning. It was odd and certainly unreasonable, yet in all her recent kindness and care of Angelique she had continued to feel that in some mysterious fashion her friend, Polly O'Neill, was encouraging and aiding her. There was some one at work, assuredly, though she had no shadow of right in believing it to be Polly. For though she had confided in no one, the first anonymous letter in regard to the ill girl had not been the last one. In truth there must have been half a dozen in all, postmarked at different places and all of them unsigned and yet showing a remarkably intimate knowledge of the growing friendship between the two girls.

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The first step had been natural and simple enough. For with her usual enthusiasm after her visit to the hospital Betty had immediately set about forming a Camp Fire. She had sent for all the literature she could find on the subject, the club manual and songs. Then she and Mollie, during her visit, and sometimes Meg, had taught the new club members as much as possible of what they had themselves learned during the old days at Sunrise Hill.

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For the first few meetings of the club in the great, sunny hospital room there was one solitary girl who would not show the least interest in the new and delightful proceedings. Indeed she kept on with her stupid gazing up toward the ceiling as if she were both deaf and blind.

However, one day when she believed no one looking and while the other girls were talking of their future aims and ambitions and of the ways in which their new club might help them, unexpectedly Betty Ashton had caught sight of Angelique, with her dark eyes fixed almost despairingly upon her.

The other girls were all busy, some of them sewing on their new ceremonial Camp Fire costumes of khaki, others making bead bands or working at basket weaving. In the meanwhile they were talking of Camp Fire honors to be won in the future and of the new names which they might hope to attain.

Therefore, almost unnoticed by any one else, Betty was able to cross over to the side of the French girl's bed.

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"I was wondering if I could not also do some of that pretty work with my hands," the girl began at once, speaking as composedly as if she had been talking to Betty every day since their first meeting, although this was only the second time that she had ever voluntarily addressed a word to her.

Without commenting or appearing surprised, Betty brought over to her bedside a quantity of bright straw and straightaway commenced showing the girl the first principles of the art of basket-weaving which she had learned in the Sunrise Camp Fire. Very little instruction was necessary; for, before the first lesson was over, the pupil had learned almost as much as her teacher. Indeed the French girl's skill with her hands was an amazement to everybody. With her

third effort and without assistance, Angel manufactured so charming a basket that Betty bore it home in triumph to show to her brother and sister. Then quite by accident the basket was left in Esther's sitting room, where a visitor, seeing it and hearing the story of its weaving, asked permission to purchase it.

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After some discussion, and fearful of how the girl might receive the offer, Betty finally summoned courage to tell Angelique. Thus unexpectedly Betty came upon one of the secrets of her new friend's nature. Angel had an inordinate, a passionate desire for making money. She was older than any one had imagined her, between fourteen and fifteen. Now her hands were no longer clenched on her coverlid nor did her eyes turn resolutely to gaze at nothingness. Propped up on her pillows, her white fingers were ever busy at dozens of tasks. Betty had found a place in Boston where her baskets were sold almost as fast as she could make them. Then Angelique knew quite amazing things about sewing, so that Esther sent her several tiny white frocks to be delicately embroidered, and always the other girls at the hospital were asking her aid and advice.

Quite astonishing the doctors considered the girl's rapid improvement. Perhaps no one had told them the secret, for she now had an interest in life and a chance not to be always useless. Was it curious that she no longer disliked Betty Ashton and that she soon became the leading spirit in the new Camp Fire?

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Afterwards the Wohelo candles were placed on a small table near Angel's bed while the girls formed their group about her.

Then one day in early April the Princess had whispered something in Angel's ear. It was only a hope or at best a plan, yet, after all, Betty Ashton was a kind of fairy godmother to whom all impossible things were possible.

For Sunrise cabin was undoubtedly open once again with four girls as its occupants—Betty Ashton and Mollie O'Neill, Cricket and "The Angel."

"I am afraid you won't find my story as interesting as you would like it to be," Angel said after a moment. "And perhaps it may prejudice you against me. I don't believe Americans think of these things as French people do. But my father was a ballet master and ever since I was the tiniest little girl I had been taught to dance and dance, almost to do nothing else. You see I was to be a *première danseuse* some day," Angel continued quite simply and calmly, scarcely noticing that Betty's face had paled through sympathy and that she was biting her lips and resolutely turning away her eyes from the fragile figure stretched out in the long steamer chair.

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"I was born in Paris, but when I was only a few years old my father came to New York and was one of the assistant ballet masters at your great opera house. Ten years later, I think it must have been, I was trying a very difficult dance and in some way I had a fall. I did not know it was very bad, we paid no attention to it, then this came." The little French girl shrugged her shoulders. "My father died soon after and mother tried taking care of us both. She did sewing at the theaters and anything else she could. She wasn't very successful. One day a chance came for me to have special treatment in Boston. I was sent there and mother got some other work to do. I have only seen her once in months and months. But you can understand now why I am so anxious to make money. I was afraid perhaps you would not. I don't want to be a burden on mother always and now I think perhaps I need not be."

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Angel spoke with entire cheerfulness and decision. It did not seem even to have occurred to her that she had been telling her friend an amazingly tragic little history. Nor did Betty Ashton wish her to realize how deeply affected she was by it. So, jumping up with rather an affectation of hurry and surprise, she kissed her companion lightly on the cheek.

"Thank you a thousand times for confiding in me, dear, and please don't be hopeless about never getting well. See how much you have improved! But there comes the first of our guests to lunch, a whole half hour too soon. But as long as Billy Webster promised to bring us the mail from Woodford I suppose I must forgive him. Anyhow I must try to keep him from worrying Mollie. She would be dreadfully bored to have him see her before she is dressed." Betty walked away for a few steps and then came back again.

162

"You will never understand perhaps, Angel, how much my learning to know you this winter has done for me. I was dreadfully unhappy over something myself, and perhaps I am still, but coming to visit you in Boston and then our being together down here has cheered me immensely. I know you are a great deal younger than I am, but if Polly O'Neill never writes me again or wishes to have anything more to do with me, perhaps some day you may be willing to be my very, very intimate friend. You see I have not had even a single line from Polly in months and months and I can't even guess what on earth has become of her."

## CHAPTER XIV—A Sudden Summons

163

Though Billy Webster had brought with him from the village half a dozen letters and as many papers, no one of the dwellers in Sunrise cabin was able to read anything for three or four hours after his arrival.

For Betty and Mollie were having an informal luncheon. But indeed, ever since taking up their



abode at the cabin several weeks before, they had never passed a single day without guests. For it was too much like old times for their Woodford friends to find the door of the little house once more hospitably open, with a log fire burning in the big fire place in the living room and the movement and laughter of girls inside the old cabin and out.

At present there were only the four of them living there together with the Ashton's old Irish cook, Ann, as their guardian, chaperon and first aid in domestic difficulties. Later on, there would be other members of the Sunrise Hill club, who were already looking forward to spending their holidays at the cabin. 164

As a matter of course, Billy Webster was at present their most frequent visitor, although his calls were ordinarily short. Almost every morning he used to ride up to the cabin on horseback to see if things had gone well with his friends during the night, or to ask if there were any errands in the village which he could do or have done for them. For you may remember that the land on which the cabin stood had been bought from Billy's father and was not far from their farm. Billy now seemed to be the only one of their former boy friends who was able to come often to the old cabin.

John Everett was at work in the broker's office in New York City, Frank Wharton had only just returned from his honeymoon journey with Eleanor Meade, and Anthony Graham was attending a session of the New Hampshire Legislature and probably spending his week ends in visits to Meg Everett. There were other men friends, assuredly, who appeared at the cabin now and then, but they had fewer associations with the past. 165

Betty was looking forward to John Everett's coming a little later; but she had begged him to wait until they were more comfortably settled and the two younger girls had grown accustomed to their new surroundings.

Today Rose Barton and Faith had driven out to the cabin for luncheon and Mrs. Crippen, Betty's step-mother with the new small step-brother, who was an adorable red-haired baby with the pinkest of cheeks and the bluest eyes in the world. Then, soon after lunch, Mr. and Mrs. Frank Wharton appeared in their up-to-date motor car, which had been Frank's wedding gift from his father.

So it was a simple enough matter to understand why neither Betty nor Mollie had the opportunity even to glance inside the envelopes of their letters, though Mollie recognized that she had received one from her mother and Betty saw that Mrs. Wharton had also written to her. There was nothing unusual in this, for Betty and Mrs. Wharton had always remained intimate and devoted friends, just as they had been since Betty was a tiny girl and Mrs. Wharton, as Mrs. O'Neill, lived across the street from the big Ashton house. 166

Certainly for the time being the two hostesses had their attention fully distracted by their social responsibilities. For Mollie had direct charge of the luncheon party, while to Betty had fallen the duty of seeing that their friends learned to understand one another and to have a gay time.

It was a pleasure for her to observe what an interest Faith Barton had immediately seemed to feel in her little French girl. For one could only think of Angelique as a child, she was so tiny and fragile with all her delicate body hidden from view save her quaint, vivid face and slender arms.

Faith herself had been a curious child, and though now so nearly grown, was not in the least like an every-day person. She was extremely pretty, suggesting a fair young saint in an old Italian picture; and still she loved dreams better than realities and books more than people. Ordinarily she was very shy; yet here in Angelique, Faith believed that she had probably found the friend of her heart. The French girl seemed romance personified, and delicately and gently she set out to woo her. But Angel was not easy to win, she was still cold and frightened with all persons except her fairy princess. Nevertheless, Betty sincerely hoped that the two girls might eventually learn to care truly for each other. 167

They were so different in appearance that it was an artistic pleasure to see them together. Faith was so soft and fair; Angel so dark and with such possibilities of restrained vivacity and passion. Then the older girl knew so little of real life, while the younger one had already touched its sorrows too deeply.

After all, it was really Faith's sudden attachment that kept the guests at the cabin longer than they had intended to remain.

At four o'clock, fearing the excitement too much for her protégé, Betty had persuaded the girl to retire to bed. Faith had at once insisted on having tea alone in the room with Angel so that they might have a chance for a really intimate conversation. It was Faith, however, who did all the talking, nor did she even have the satisfaction of knowing that her new acquaintance had enjoyed her. Certainly the French girl was going to be difficult; yet perhaps to a romantic nature mystery is the greatest attraction. 168

Actually it was almost six o'clock when the last visitor had finally departed from Sunrise cabin and Mollie and Betty had a few quiet moments together. It had been a beautiful day and now when the sun was sinking behind the hill, spreading its radiance over the world, the two friends stepped outside the cabin door for a short breathing spell.

Betty had completely forgotten her unopened letters; she was thinking of something entirely different, and her gray eyes were not free from a certain wistfulness as she looked around the familiar landscape. All day long, although she had done her best at concealment, she had felt vaguely restless and unhappy. There had been no definite reason, except, perhaps, the pathetic 169

story confided to her earlier in the day.

Suddenly Mollie O'Neill turned toward her friend, at the same instant drawing two letters from her pocket.

"I declare, Betty dear, I have not had a single moment of leisure all day, not even time to read mother's letter. Have you? I do hope she had nothing of special importance to say. I thought she might possibly come and see us for a while this afternoon."

Seeing Mollie open Mrs. Wharton's note and beginning to read it, Betty immediately followed her example. But the moment after both girls turned their eyes from studying the sheets of paper before them to stare curiously at each other.

"How very extraordinary and how very unlike mother!" exclaimed Mollie O'Neill in a puzzled fashion.

"Surely she must know that it is quite out of the question for us to do what she asks," Betty went on, as if continuing her friend's sentence. "She understands that we have just come to the cabin and that we have promised to take the best kind of care of Angel and Cricket with Dr. Barton's assistance. Of course, Mollie, you may *have* to do what your mother says, but do please make her understand that it is impossible for me. I wish she was not so insistent, though, it makes it dreadfully difficult to refuse. Does your letter say that you must leave for New York City as early as possible tomorrow and join your mother at the Astor Hotel?"

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Mollie nodded, still frowning. "If mother wished us to go to New York with her on business, or pleasure, or for whatever reason, I cannot see why she did not wait and let us all go together tomorrow. I simply can't see why she should rush off this morning as her letter says and leave us to follow the next day. But I suppose if you can get some one to stay on here at the cabin with you, dear, that I must do as mother asks. You see, she writes that it is a matter of great importance that has called her away and that she is relying on my being with her."

Reading her own letter for the second time, Betty folded it thoughtfully and replaced it inside the envelope. "Of course you must go, Mollie, without a shadow of a doubt," she answered positively. "Rose and Faith will come out here and stay for a few days and Dr. Barton will be with them at night. I shall be rather glad to have them know Angel better; it might help her in a good many ways. The thing that troubles me is whether I ought to go with you. You see your mother also writes that she is relying on having me with her as well. Though she does not give me her reason, still she is very positive. She says that my coming to New York at the present time will mean a great deal to me personally, and moreover she particularly desires me to be with you." Betty slowly shook her head. "I don't see exactly how I can refuse; do you, Mollie? I don't believe your mother has ever been really angry with me in my life and I should so hate her to be now. Besides I think it would be rather fun to go, and of course Rose would look after things for a few days."

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"Then it is decided?" and Mollie breathed a sigh of mingled relief and pleasure. "Well, I must go in at once and telephone Billy and ask him to look up time-tables and things. Mother has sent me a check big enough to pay our expenses if you do not happen to have the money at the cabin with you."

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All the hours following that evening and in the early morning were too busy with preparations and explanations to allow of much conjecture; yet in the back of their minds both girls were trying to work out the same problem.

What conceivable thing could have happened to make Mrs. Wharton summon them to New York in this odd fashion? Could it have anything to do with Polly? But if Polly had been taken suddenly ill, would Mrs. Wharton not have given them some slight warning, some preparation for the shock that might lie ahead of them? Yet it was idle to make vain guesses or to worry without cause. In a short while Mrs. Wharton would, of course, explain the whole situation.

As passengers on the earliest afternoon train that left Woodford for New York City next day, Mollie and Betty had already forgotten their first opposition to this journey to New York. All at once it appeared like a very delightful and natural excursion. If Mrs. Wharton had occasion to spend several days in New York what more agreeable than spending the time with her? There would be the shops and theaters to visit and a glimpse at the new spring fashions. Moreover, Betty did not altogether object to the idea of possibly seeing John Everett. They were old friends and his open admiration and attention meant a great deal to her.

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## CHAPTER XV—"Little Old New York"

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Mrs. Wharton did not seem to consider that an explanation was imperative immediately upon the arrival of the two girls in New York. At the Forty-second street station she met them in a taxi, and certainly in traveling to their hotel through the usual exciting crush of motors, carriages and people there was no opportunity for serious questioning.

They were to go to a musical as soon as dinner was over and there was just sufficient time to dress. So Betty went almost at once to her own room adjoining Mrs. Wharton's, while Mollie occupied the room with her mother.

Once while Mrs. Wharton was adjusting the drapery on a new frock which she had purchased for her daughter only that afternoon, Mollie turned toward her mother with her blue eyes suddenly serious. Up to that instant she had been too much absorbed in her frock to think of anything else.

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"Why in the world, mother, did you send for us to join you in New York so unexpectedly? If you were thinking of coming, why did you not motor out and tell us? Or you might at least have telephoned," she said.

Mrs. Wharton's face was not visible, as she was engaged for the moment in the study of the new gown. "I made up my mind quite hurriedly, dear. There was nothing I could explain over the telephone. Besides, I have heard you and Betty say a dozen times that nothing gave you as much pleasure as a trip taken without any special discussion or preparation. Don't you think we will have a charming time, just the three of us, dining at the different hotels, going to the theaters? I believe one calls it 'doing New York.' But hurry, now, and finish fixing your hair. I must go and see if I can be of any assistance to the Princess." And Mrs. Wharton hurried off without even attempting to answer her daughter's question.

Almost the same result followed a more deliberate attempt at cross-examination which took place at breakfast the following morning. This time both Mollie and Betty started forth as determined questioners. Why had they been summoned so suddenly to New York? What was the very important reason for their presence? It was all very charming, of course, and frankly both girls were delighted with the opportunity that had been given them. Still they both thought it only natural and fair that they should be offered some solution to the puzzle of their mysterious and hasty letters.

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Mrs. Wharton only laughed and shrugged her shoulders ever so slightly, in a manner always suggestive of Polly. She did not see why she had to be taken to task so seriously because of an agreeable invitation. Had she said that there was some urgent reason for her request? Well, was it not sufficient that she wished the society of the two girls?

Then deliberately picking up the morning paper Mrs. Wharton refused to listen to any further remarks addressed to her. A few moments afterwards, observing that her companions had wandered from their original topic and were criticizing the appearance of a young woman a few tables away, a smile suddenly crumpled the corners of her mouth.

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"Mollie, Betty, there are the most wonderful advertisements in the papers this morning of amazing bargains. Mollie, you and I both need new opera cloaks dreadfully and Mr. Wharton has said we might both have them. Of course we will shop all morning, but what shall we do tonight? Go to the theater, I suppose. When country people are in town an evening not spent at the theater is almost a wasted one."

Mollie laughed. "This from mother!" she exclaimed. "Think what you used to tell poor Polly about the wickedness of things theatrical! But of course I should rather go than do anything else."

Mrs. Wharton glanced toward Betty, who appeared to be blushing slightly without apparent cause.

"I am afraid I can't go with you, if you don't mind," she explained. "You see I promised John Everett that I would see him tonight. He wrote asking me to give him my first evening, but I thought it better to make it the second."

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"Well, bring John along with us, Betty dear," Mrs. Wharton returned. "I should like very much to have him and besides I don't believe I should like you to go out with him alone in New York or to see him here at the hotel unless I am with you. People are more conventional here, dear, than in a small place."

Betty nodded. "Of course, we shall be delighted to be with you. What play shall we see?"

Thoughtfully Mrs. Wharton picked up for the second time the temporarily discarded paper and commenced studying the list of theatrical attractions.

"There is a little Irish play that has been running here in New York for about a month that is a great success," she said. "I think I should very much like to see it if you girls don't mind. It is called Moira. I hope we shall be able to get good seats."

The little party of three did not get back to the hotel until after tea time that afternoon and were then compelled to lie down, as they were completely worn out from shopping. But fatigue made no difference in the interest of the toilets which the girls made for the evening. John Everett had been invited to dinner as well, and most unexpectedly Mr. Wharton had telegraphed that he was running down from Woodford for twenty-four hours and was bringing Billy Webster along with him. They would probably manage to arrive at about eight o'clock and would dress as quickly as possible. Dinner was not to be delayed on their account. They expected to dine on the train.

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Of course Betty had promptly yielded to temptation and bought herself a new evening frock before the shopping expedition had been under way two hours. Mrs. Wharton had bought Mollie a charming one only the day before and was now buying her an opera coat to make the toilet complete. It was extravagant; Betty fully appreciated her own weakness. Was she not at great expense keeping Sunrise cabin open and looking after her two new friends? However, she had not been to New York for months and would probably not be there again in a longer time and the frock was a rare bargain and should not be overlooked. But every woman and girl thoroughly understands the arguments that must be gone through conscientiously before yielding to the sure temptation of clothes.

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Assuredly Betty felt no pangs of conscience when she looked at herself in the mirror a few moments before dinner time and just as she was about to join her friends. The dress was simple and not expensive, white *crepe de Chine* with a tunic of chiffon, adorned with a wide corn-colored girdle and little chiffon roses of the same shade, bordering the neck and elbow sleeves. Betty wore a bunch of violets at her waist. Mollie was in pure white, which was particularly becoming to her because of her dark hair and fair skin.

But although the two girls had never looked prettier and although Mrs. Wharton was now past forty, a number of persons, seeing the little party, might have thought her the best-looking of the three. For even in her early girlhood, when she had been the recognized belle of Woodford, never had she seemed more radiant, more full of vitality and happiness. She wore a curious blue and silver silk dress with a diamond ornament in her beautiful gray hair.

All during dinner both Mollie and Betty discovered themselves gazing at Mrs. Wharton admiringly and with some wonder. For not only was she looking handsomer than usual, but seemed to be in the gayest spirits. Neither John Everett nor the girls had the opportunity for much conversation, as Mrs. Wharton absorbed the greater part of it.

However, after Billy and Mr. Wharton had joined them, the four young people drove together to the theater, Mr. and Mrs. Wharton following in a second cab.

The theater party was by this time such a large one, that, although there had been no mention made of it beforehand, no one was surprised at being shown a box instead of orchestra seats. However, the fact that the box was already occupied by two other figures was a tremendous surprise to Mollie and Betty.

One of them was a tall young man with black hair, a singularly well-cut though rather pale face, and handsome hazel eyes. The other was a girl, rather under medium height, with light hair and a figure as expressive of strength and quiet determination as her face.

"Why, Sylvia Wharton, what on earth has brought you to New York at such a time?" Mollie O'Neill demanded, throwing her arm affectionately around her step-sister's waist and drawing her into the rear of the box. "I didn't think any power on earth could persuade you to leave those dreadful studies of yours so near examination time!"

"Oh, I am one of mother's surprises for you in New York!" Sylvia replied as calmly as though she had always known the whole story of the two girls' unexpected journey. Calmness was ever a trait of Sylvia's character.

Mollie was so excited by this unlooked-for meeting with her younger sister that she would give no one else a chance to speak to her. The girls and their two escorts had arrived before Mr. and Mrs. Wharton, and it was therefore Mollie's place to have welcomed their second guest or at least to have spoken to him.

Under the circumstances Betty Ashton found herself compelled to offer her hand to Anthony Graham before any one else seemed aware of his presence. She was surprised to see him, she explained, yet very glad he happened to be in town for the evening. Betty was polite, certainly; still, no one could have exactly accused her of cordiality. Therefore Anthony was not sorry that the arrival of his host and hostess at this instant spared her from further effort.

The evening was apparently to continue one of surprises. For no sooner had Mrs. Wharton's party seated themselves in their box than Mollie touched Betty and Sylvia lightly with her fan.

"See, dears," she whispered, "look straight across the theater at the box opposite us. There is Margaret Adams and that good-looking Mr. Hunt, who used to be a friend of Polly's." Mollie turned to her mother. "Did you know Miss Adams was in New York? I thought she and Mr. Hunt were still acting."

Mrs. Wharton shook her head. "No, dear, their tour ended a week or more ago. Miss Adams is here in New York resting. She will not play again until next fall, I believe. Yes, I have seen her once since I came to town. But don't talk, I wish to study my program."

With this suggestion both Mollie and Betty glanced for an instant at the list of characters in the center of their books of the play. Peggy Moore was the star of the performance. She was a young actress who must have earned her reputation quite recently, for no one had heard of her until a short while before.

The bell rang for the raising of the curtain and at the same time Margaret Adams blew a kiss to the girls from behind her fan.

## CHAPTER XVI—"Moira"

The first scene of the play opened upon a handsome New York drawing room, where preparations were evidently being made for a ball, for the room was filled with flowers, and servants were seen walking in and out, completing the final arrangements. Within a few moments two girls wearing dainty tea gowns, stole quietly down the stairway and stood in the center of the stage, discussing their approaching entertainment. They were both pretty and fashionable young women, evidently about eighteen and twenty-one. From their conversation it soon became

evident that they were of plain origin and making a desperate effort to secure a place for themselves among the "smart set" in New York City. Moreover, they were spending more money than they should in the effort. The father had been an Irish politician, but, as he had died several years before, no outsiders knew the extent of the family fortune. Upon the horizon there was a friend upon whom much depended. He was evidently a member of an old New York family and of far better social standing than the rest of their acquaintances; moreover, he was wealthy, handsome and agreeable and had paid the older of the two sisters, Kate, somewhat marked attention.

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When after a few moments' delay the second scene was revealed the ball had already begun. The stage setting was remarkably beautiful, the costumes charming and the dialogue clever. Yet so far the play had no poignant interest, so that now and then Betty found her attention wandering.

What could have made this little play such a pronounced success that the dramatic critics had been almost universal in their praise of it? she wondered. What special charm did it have which crowded the theater every evening as it was crowded tonight? It was only a frivolous society drama of a kind that must have been acted many times before.

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Behind her lace handkerchief Betty gracefully concealed a yawn. Then she glanced across the theater toward Margaret Adams' box, hoping she might catch another smile or nod from the great lady. But Miss Adams was leaning forward with her figure tense with interest and her eyes fastened in eager expectancy upon a door at the rear of the stage. Back of her, and it seemed to Betty even at this distance, that his face looked unusually white and strained, stood Richard Hunt. Assuredly he seemed as intent upon the play as Miss Adams.

Betty stared at the stage again. A dance had just ended, the guests were separating into groups and standing about talking. But a timid knock now sounded on the door which apparently no one heard. A moment later this door is slowly opened. There followed a murmur of excitement, a little electric thrill passing through the audience so that unexpectedly Betty found her own pulses tingling with interest and excitement. What a goose she had been! Surely she had heard half a dozen times at least that the success of this new play was entirely due to the charm and talent of the young actress, Peggy Moore, who took the part of the heroine.

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At the open door the newcomer was seen hesitating. No one noticed her, then she walked timidly forward and stood alone in the center of the stage, one of the most appealing, delicious and picturesque of figures in the world of fiction or reality.

The girl was wearing an absurd costume, a bright red blouse, open at the throat, a plaid skirt too short for the slender legs beneath it and a big flapping straw hat decorated with a single rose. In one hand she carried an old-fashioned carpet bag and in the other a tiny Maltese kitten. The girl had two long braids of black hair that hung below her waist, scarlet lips, a white imploring face and wistful, humorous, tender blue eyes.

Betty was growing cold to the tips of her fingers, although her face flushed until it felt almost painful. Then she overheard a queer, half-restrained sound near her and the next instant Mrs. Wharton leaned forward from her place and placed a hand on her arm and on Mollie's.

"Yes, girls, it is Polly!" she whispered quietly, although with shining eyes. "But please, please don't stir or do anything in the world to attract her attention. It was Polly's own idea to surprise you like this, and yet she is dreadfully afraid that the sight of you may make her break down and forget her part. She is simply wonderful!"

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Naturally this was a mother's opinion; however, nothing that Mrs. Wharton was saying was making the slightest impression, for neither Mollie nor Betty had heard a word.

For Moira, the little Irish girl, had begun to speak and everybody on the stage was looking toward her, smiling and shrugging their shoulders, except the two daughters of the house and their fashionable mother.

Moira had asked for her aunt, Mrs. Mulholland. She was not an emigrant maid-of-all-work, as the guests presumed her to be, but a niece of the wealthy household. She had crossed the ocean alone and was expecting a welcome from her relatives.

At this point in the drama the hero came forward to the little Irish maid's assistance. Then her aunt and cousins dared not display the anger they felt for this undesired guest. Later it was explained that Moira had been sent to New York by her old grandfather, who, fearing that he was about to die, wished the girl looked after by her relatives. Moira's father had been the son that stayed behind in Ireland. He had been desperately poor and the grandfather was supposed to be equally so. Then, of course, followed the history of the child's efforts to fit herself into the insincere and unkind household.

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Nothing remarkable in the story of the little play, surely, but everything in the art with which Polly O'Neill acted it!

Tears and smiles, both in writing and acting: these are what the artist desires as his true recognition. And Polly seldom spoke half a dozen lines without receiving one or the other. Sometimes the smiles and tears crowded so close together that the one had not sufficient time to thrust the other away.

"I didn't dream the child had it in her: it is genius!" Margaret Adams whispered to her companion, when the curtain had finally fallen on the second act and she had leaned back in her chair with a sigh of mingled pleasure and relief.

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"She had my promise to say nothing until tonight. Yes, I have been in the secret since last winter." Richard explained. "It was a blessed accident Polly's finding just this particular kind of play. She could have played no other so well while still so young. You see, she was acting in a cheap stock company when a manager happened quite by chance to discover her. But she will want to tell you the story herself. I must not anticipate."

For a moment, instead of replying, Margaret Adams looked slightly amazed. "I did not know that you and Polly were such great friends, Richard, that she has preferred confiding in you to any one else," she said at length.

Richard Hunt had taken his seat and was now watching the unconcealed triumph and delight among the group of Polly's family and friends in the box across the theater.

"I wasn't chosen; I was an accident," the man smiled. "Last winter in Boston I met Polly—Miss O'Neill," he corrected himself, "and she told me what she was trying to do, fight things out for herself without advice or assistance from any one of us. But, of course, after I was taken into her secret she allowed me to keep in touch with her now and then. The child was lonely and dreadfully afraid you and her other friends would not understand or forgive what she had tried to do."

"Polly is not exactly a child, Richard; she must be nearly twenty-two," Margaret Adams replied quietly.

In the final act the little Irish heroine had her hour of triumph. The hero had fallen in love with her instead of with the fashionable cousin. Yet Moira was not the pauper her relatives had believed her, for the old grandfather had recently died and his solicitor appeared with his will. The Irish township had purchased his acres of supposedly worthless land and Moira was proclaimed an heiress.

At the end Polly was her gayest, most inimitable, laughing self. Half a dozen times Betty, Mollie and Sylvia found themselves forgetting that she was acting at all. How many times had they not known her just as wilful and charming, their Polly of a hundred swift, succeeding moods.

Moira was not angry with any one in the world, certainly not with the cousins who had been almost cruel to her. During her stay among them she had learned of their need of money and was now quick to offer all that she had. She was so generous, so happy, and with it all so petulant and charming, that at last even the stern aunt and the envious cousins succumbed to her.

Then the curtain descended on a very differently clad heroine, but one who was essentially unchanged. Moira was dressed in a white satin made in the latest and most exquisite fashion; and her black hair was beautifully arranged on her small, graceful head. Only the people who loved her could have dreamed that Polly O'Neill would ever look so pretty. And in one hand the girl was holding a single red rose, though under the other arm she was still clutching her beloved Maltese cat.

"Polly will not answer any curtain calls tonight," Mrs. Wharton whispered hurriedly when the last scene was over. "If the others will excuse us she has asked that only Sylvia, Betty and Mollie come to her room. Margaret Adams will be there, but no one else. She is very tired at the close of her performances, but she is afraid you girls may not forgive her long silence and her deception. Will you come this way with me?"

## CHAPTER XVII—A Reunion

Next morning at half past ten o'clock Polly O'Neill was sitting upright in bed in the room at her hotel with Betty on one side, Mollie on the other and Sylvia at the foot, gazing rather searchingly upon the object of their present devotion.

Polly was wearing a pale pink dressing jacket trimmed with a great deal of lace and evidently quite new. Indeed it had been purchased with the idea of celebrating this great occasion. The girl's cheeks were as crimson as they had been on the stage the night before and her eyes were as shining. She was talking with great rapidity and excitement.

"Yes, it is perfectly thrilling and delightful, Mollie Mavourneen, and I never was so happy in my life, now that you know all about me and are not really angry," Polly exclaimed gayly. "But I can tell you it wasn't all honey and roses last winter, working all alone and being lonely and homesick and miserable most of the time. No one praised me or sent me flowers *then*," and the girl looked with perfectly natural vanity and satisfaction at the big box of roses that had just been opened and was still lying on her lap. On her bureau there were vases of fresh flowers and several other boxes on a nearby table.

"Well, it must be worth any amount of hard work and unhappiness to be so popular and famous," Mollie murmured, glancing with heartfelt admiration and yet with a little wistfulness at her twin sister. "Just think, Polly dear, we are exactly the same age and used to do almost the same things; and now you are a celebrated actress and I'm just nobody at all. I am sorry I used to be so opposed to your going on the stage. I think it perfectly splendid now."

With a laugh that had a slight quaver in it Polly threw an arm about her sister and hugged her

close. "You silly darling, how you have always flattered me and how dearly I do love it!" she returned, looking with equal admiration at the soft roundness of Mollie's girlish figure and the pretty dimples in her delicately pink cheeks. "I am not a celebrated actress in the least, sister of mine, just because I have succeeded in doing one little character part so that a few people, just a few people, like it. I do wonder what Margaret Adams thought of me. She did not say much last night. She is coming to see me presently, so I am desperately nervous over what she will say. One swallow does not make a career any more than it makes a summer. And as for daring to say you are nobody, Mollie O'Neill, I never heard such arrant nonsense in my life. For you know perfectly well that you are a thousand times prettier, more charming and more popular than I am, and everybody knows it except you. But, of course, you never have believed it in your life, you blessed little goose!" and Polly pinched her sister's soft arm appreciatively. "I wish there was as much of me as there is of you for one thing, Mollie darling, your figure is a perfect dream and I'm nothing in the world but skin and bones," Polly finished at last, drawing her dressing jacket more closely about her with a barely concealed shiver.

From the foot of the bed Sylvia was eyeing her severely. "Yes, we had already noticed that without your mentioning it, Polly," she remarked dryly.

Her only answer was a careless shrugging of her thin shoulders, as Polly turned this time toward Betty.

"What makes *you* so silent, Princess? You are not vexed with me and only said you were not angry last night to spare my feelings?" Polly asked more seriously than she had yet spoken. Even though Polly might believe that she loved her sister better, yet she realized that they could never so completely understand each other and never have perhaps quite the same degree of spiritual intimacy as she had with her friend.

Betty took Polly's outstretched hand and held it lightly.

"I was only thinking of something; I beg your pardon, dear," Betty replied quietly.

Polly frowned. "You are not to think of anything or anybody except me today," she demanded jealously. "You have had months and months to think about other people. This is the best of what I have been working for—just to have you girls with me like this, and have you praise me and make love to me as Mollie did. Yes, I understand I am being desperately vain and self-centered, Princess; so you may think it your duty to take me to task for it. But it is only because I have always been such a dreadful black sheep among all the other Camp Fire girls. Then I suppose it is also because we have been separated so long. Pretty soon I'll have to go back to the work-a-day, critical old world where nobody really cares a thing about me and where 'my career,' as Mollie calls it, has scarcely begun. But please don't make me do all the talking, Betty, it is so unlike me and I can see that Sylvia thinks I am saying far too much." Here Polly's apparently endless stream of conversation was interrupted by a fit of coughing, which took all the color from her cheeks, brought there by the morning's excitement, and left her huddled up among her pillows pale and breathless, with Sylvia's light blue eyes staring at her with a somewhat enigmatic expression.

Betty smiled, however, pulling at one of the long braids of black hair with some severity. Last night it had seemed to her that Polly O'Neill was quite the most wonderful person in the world and that she could never feel exactly the same toward her, but must surely treat her with entirely new reverence and respect. Yet here she was, just as absurd and childish as ever and pleading for compliments as a child for sweets. No one could treat Polly O'Neill with great respect, though love her one must to the end of the chapter. She had a thousand faults, yet Betty knew that vanity was not one of them. It was simply because of her affection for her friends that she wished to find them pleased with her. In her heart of hearts no one was humbler than Polly. Betty at least understood that her ambition would never leave her satisfied with one success.

"But I *was* thinking of you, my ridiculous Polly!" Betty answered finally. "I regret to state, however, that I was not for the moment dwelling on your great and glorious career. Naturally no other Sunrise Hill Camp Fire girl may ever hope to aspire so high. I was wondering whether your mother allowed you to wander around by yourself last winter, and, if she did, how you ever managed to take proper care of yourself."

"Dear me, hasn't mother told you? Why of course I had a chaperon, child! Mollie, please ring the bell for me. She is a dear and is dreadfully anxious to meet all of you," Polly explained. "But Sylvia took care of me too—would you mind not staring at me quite so hard *all* the time, Sylvia? I know I am better looking behind the footlights," Polly now urged almost plaintively, for her younger sister was making her decidedly nervous by her continued scrutiny. "Betty, even you will hardly place me at the head of the theatrical profession at present," she continued. "Though I am quite green with jealousy, I must tell you that Sylvia Wharton has stood at the head of her class in medicine, male and female, during this entire year and is confidently expected to come out first in her final examinations. I am abominably afraid that Sylvia may develop into a more distinguished Camp Fire girl in the end than I ever shall."

There was no further opportunity at present for further personal discussion, for at this instant a tall, dark-haired woman with somewhat timid manners entered the room, where she stood hesitating, glancing from one girl's face to the other.

"You know Sylvia, Mrs. Martins, so this is Mollie, whom you may recognize as being a good-looking likeness of me," Polly began. "Of course this third person is necessarily Betty Ashton."

From her place on the bed Sylvia had smiled her greeting, but Mollie and Betty of course got up

at once and walked forward to shake hands with the newcomer.

Then unexpectedly and to Betty's immense surprise, she found both of her hands immediately clasped in an ardent embrace by the stranger, while the woman gazed at her with her lips trembling and the tears streaming unchecked down her face.

"How shall I ever thank you or make you understand?" she said passionately. "All my life long I can never repay what you have done for me, but at least I shall never forget it."

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Betty pressed the newcomer's hand politely, turning from her to Polly, hoping that she might in her friend's expression find some clue to this puzzling utterance. Polly appeared just as rapt and mysterious.

"You are awfully kind and I am most happy to meet you," Betty felt called on to reply, "but I am afraid you must have mistaken me for some one else. It is I who owe gratitude to you for having taken such good care of Polly."

The Princess was gracious and sweet in her manner, but she could hardly be expected not to have drawn back slightly from such an extraordinary greeting from a stranger.

"Oh, my dear, I ought to have explained to you. You must forgive me, it is because I feel so deeply and that the people of my race cannot always control their emotions so readily," the older woman protested. "It is my little girl, for whom you have done such wonderful things. She has written me that she is almost happy now that you have become her fairy princess. And in truth you are quite lovely enough," the stranger continued, believing that at last she was making herself clear.

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"I? Your little girl?" Betty repeated stupidly. "You don't mean you are Angelique's mother? But of course you are. Now I can see that you look like each other and your name is 'Martins.' It is curious, but I paid no attention to your name at first and never associated you with my little French girl." Now it was Betty's turn to find her voice shaking, partly from pleasure and also from embarrassment. "It was a beautiful accident, wasn't it, for Angelique and I, and you and Polly to find each other? But you have nothing to thank me for, Mrs. Martins. Angel has given me more pleasure than I can ever give her. She has been so wonderful since she found something in life to interest her. Won't you come to the cabin with me right away and see her? Mollie and Mrs. Wharton can surely look after Polly for a few days; besides she never does what any one tells her."

Suddenly Betty let go her companion's hand, swinging around toward the elfish figure in the bed. For Polly did look elfish at this moment, with her knees huddled up almost to her chin and her head resting on her hand. Her eyes were almost all one could see of her face at present, they looked so absurdly large and so darkly blue.

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Betty seized the girl by both shoulders, giving her a tiny shake.

"Polly O'Neill, did you write me those anonymous letters about Angel last winter? Oh, of course you did! But what a queer muddle it all is! I don't understand, for Angel told me that she had never heard of Polly O'Neill in her entire life until I spoke of you."

"And no more she has, Princess," returned Polly smiling. "Everybody sit down and be good, please, while I explain things as far as I understand them. You see Mrs. Martins and I met each other at the theater one evening where she had come to do some wonderful sewing for some one. Well, of course my clothes were in rags, for with all our Camp Fire training I never learned much about the gentle art of stitching. So Mrs. Martins promised to do some work for me and by and by we got to knowing each other pretty well. One day I found her crying, and then she told me about her little girl. A friend had offered to send Angelique to this hospital in Boston and Mrs. Martins felt she must let her go, as she could not make enough money to keep them comfortable. Besides Angelique needed special care and treatment. Of course she realized it was best for her little girl, yet they were horribly grieved over being separated.

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"Just at this time, Miss Brown, whom mother had persuaded to travel with me all winter, got terribly tired of her job. So I asked Mrs. Martins if she cared to come with me. When she and mother learned to know and like each other things were arranged.

"Afterwards the heavenly powers must have sent you to that hospital, Betty dear, otherwise there is no accounting for it. Pretty soon after your first visit Angel wrote her mother describing a lovely lady with auburn hair, gray eyes and the most charming manner in the world, who had been to the hospital to see them, but had only said a few words to her. Yes, I know you think that is queer, Betty, but please remember that though Angelique knew her mother was traveling with an eccentric young female, she did not know my real name. I was Peggy Moore to her always, just as I was to you until last night. Can't you understand? Of course I knew you were in Boston with Esther and Dick, and besides there could be only one Betty Ashton in the world answering to your description. Then, of course, Mrs. Martins and I both wanted to write and explain things to you dreadfully, yet at the same time I did not wish you to guess where I was or what I was doing. So I persuaded Mrs. Martins to wait; at the same time I did write you these silly anonymous letters, for I was so anxious for you to be particularly interested in Angel. I might have known you would have been anyway, you dearest of princesses and best," whispered Polly so earnestly that Betty drew away from her friend's embrace, her cheeks scarlet.

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"I am going to another room with Mrs. Martins to have a long talk, Polly, while you rest," Betty answered the next moment. "Mrs. Wharton said that we were not to stay with you but an hour and a half and it has been two already. You will want to be at your best when Margaret Adams comes to see you this afternoon."

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"If you mean in the best of health, Betty," Sylvia remarked at this instant, as she got down somewhat awkwardly from her seat on the bed, "then I might as well tell you that Polly O'Neill is far from being even ordinarily well. She has not been well all winter; but now, with the excitement and strain of her first success, she is utterly used up. All I can say is that if she does not quit this acting business and go somewhere and have a *real rest*, well, we shall all be sorry some day," and with this unexpected announcement Sylvia stalked calmly out of the room, leaving three rather frightened women and one exceedingly angry one behind her.

## CHAPTER XVIII—Home Again

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"But, my beloved mother, you really can't expect such a sacrifice of me. There isn't anything else in the world you could ask that I would not agree to, but even you must see that this is out of the question."

It was several days later and Polly was in her small sitting room with her mother and Sylvia.

"Besides it is absurd and wicked of Sylvia to have frightened you so and I shan't forgive her, even if she has been good as gold to me all her life. How can I give up my part and go away from New York just when I am beginning to be a tiny bit successful?" Then, overcome with sympathy for herself, Polly cast herself down in a heap upon a small sofa and with her face buried in the sofa cushions burst into tears.

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Mrs. Wharton walked nervously up and down the room.

"I know it is dreadfully hard for you, dear, and I do realize how much I am asking, even if you don't think so, Polly," she replied. "Besides you must not be angry with Sylvia. Of course I have not taken the child's opinion alone, clever as she is. Two physicians have seen you in the last few days, as you know, and they have both given me the same opinion. You are on the verge of a nervous breakdown. If you will give up now it may not be serious, but if you will insist upon going on with your work no one will answer for the consequences. It is only a matter of a few weeks, my dear. I have seen your manager and he is willing to agree to your stopping as long as it is absolutely necessary. Perhaps you may be well enough to start in again in the fall. Isn't it wiser to stop now for a short rest than to have to give up altogether later on?" she urged consolingly.

As there was no answer from Polly, Mrs. Wharton's own eyes also filled with tears. At the same moment Sylvia came up to her step-mother and patted her comfortingly on the shoulder. It was odd, but Sylvia rarely expressed affection by kissing or the embraces common among most girls. Yet in her somewhat shy caresses there was fully as deep feeling.

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"Don't worry, mother, things will turn out all right," she now said reassuringly. "Of course it is pretty hard on Polly. Even I appreciate that. But it is silly of her to protest against the inevitable. She will save herself a lot of strength if she only finds *that* out some day. But I'll leave you together, since my being here only makes her more obstinate than ever."

As Sylvia was crossing the floor a sofa cushion was thrown violently at her from the apparently grief-stricken figure on the sofa. But while Mrs. Wharton looked both grieved and shocked Sylvia only laughed. Was there ever such another girl as her step-sister? Here she was at one instant weeping bitterly at the wrecking of her career, as she thought, and the next shying sofa cushions like a naughty child.

Once Sylvia was safely out of the way, Polly again sat upright on the sofa, drawing her mother down beside her. It was just as well that Sylvia had departed, for she was the one person in the world whom Polly had never been able to influence, or turn from her own point of view, by any amount of argument or persuasion. With her mother alone her task would be easier. Nevertheless Mrs. Wharton appeared singularly determined and Polly remembered that there had been occasions when her mother's decision must be obeyed.

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However, she was no longer a child, and although it would make her extremely miserable to appear both obstinate and unloving, it might in this single instance be absolutely necessary. How much had she not already endured to gain this slight footing in her profession? Now to turn her back on it in the midst of her first success, because a few persons had made up their minds that she was ill,—well, any sensible or reasonable human being must understand that it was *quite* out of the question.

So the discussion continued between the woman and girl, the same arguments being repeated over and over, the same pleading, and yet without arriving at any sort of conclusion. There is no knowing how long this might have kept up if there had not come a sudden knocking at the door.

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Opening it the boy outside handed Mrs. Wharton a card.

"It is Mr. Hunt who has come to see you, Polly; shall I say you are not well? Or what shall I say? Of course it is out of the question for you to see any stranger, child. You have been crying until your face is swollen and your hair is in dreadful confusion," Mrs. Wharton protested anxiously.

Polly unexpectedly scrambled to her feet. "Ask Mr. Hunt to wait a few minutes, please, mother, and then we will telephone down and tell him to come up. You see I had an engagement with him this afternoon and don't like to refuse to see him. For once it is a good thing I have no

pretensions to beauty like Betty and Mollie. Moreover, mother, I am obliged to confess to you that Mr. Hunt has seen me before, not only after I had been weeping, but while I was engaged in the act. You know he was about the only friend I saw all last winter, when I was so blue and discouraged with life. Besides, I am sure he will understand my point of view in this dreadful discussion we have just been having and will help me to convince you.”

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Five minutes afterwards the celebrated Miss Polly O'Neill had restored her hair and costume to some semblance of order, although her eyes were still somewhat red and heavy, as well as her nose. Nevertheless she greeted her visitor without particular embarrassment. Mrs. Wharton, however, could not pull herself together so readily; so after a few moments of conventional conversation she asked to be excused and went away, leaving her daughter and guest alone.

Fifteen minutes passed, half an hour, finally an entire hour. All this while Mrs. Wharton, remaining in her daughter's bedroom which adjoined the sitting room, could hear the sound of two voices.

Of course Polly did the greater share of the talking, but now and then Richard Hunt would speak for several moments at a time and afterwards there would be odd intervals of silence.

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Mrs. Wharton could not hear what was being said, and she scarcely wished to return to the sitting room. She was still far too worried and nervous, although, having an engagement that must be kept, she wished to say good-by to Polly before leaving the hotel.

Richard Hunt rose immediately upon Mrs. Wharton's entrance.

“I am ever so sorry to have made such a long visit,” he apologized at once, “and I hope I have not interfered with you. Only Miss O'Neill and I have been having a pretty serious and important talk and I did not realize how much time had passed.”

Polly's eyes had been fastened upon something in the far distance. Now she glanced toward her guest.

“Oh, you need not apologize to mother for the length of your stay. When she hears what we have been discussing she will be more than grateful to you,” Polly interrupted.

“You see, mother, Mr. Hunt does not agree with me, as I thought he would. Who ever has agreed with me in this tiresome world? He also thinks that I must stop acting at once and go away with you, if my family and the doctors think it necessary. And he has frightened me terribly with stories of people who have nervous breakdowns and never recover. People who never remember the lines in their plays again or what part they are expected to act. So I surrender, dear. I'll go away with you as soon as things can be arranged wherever you wish to take me.” And Polly held up both her hands with an intended expression of saintliness, which was not altogether successful.

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“Bravo!” Richard Hunt exclaimed quietly.

Mrs. Wharton extended her hand.

“I am more grateful to you than I can express. You have saved us all from a great deal of unhappiness and I believe you have saved Polly from more than she understands,” she added.

The girl took her mother's hand, touching it lightly with her lips. “Please don't tell Mr. Hunt what my family think of my obstinacy,” she pleaded. “Because if you do, he will either have no respect for me or else will have too much for himself because I gave in to him,” she said saucily.

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Yet it was probably ten minutes after Mr. Hunt's departure before it occurred to Mrs. Wharton to be surprised over Polly's unexpected surrender to a comparative stranger, when she had refused to be influenced by any member of her own family.

But now the question of chief importance was where should Polly go for her much needed rest? It was her own decision finally that rather than any other place in the world she preferred to return to Woodford to spend the summer months in the old cabin near Sunrise Hill.

## CHAPTER XIX—Illusions Swept Away

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It was a golden July afternoon two months later when all nature was a splendid riot of color and perfume. In a hammock under a group of pine trees a girl lay half asleep. Now and then she would open her eyes to glance at the lazy white clouds overhead. Then she would look with perhaps closer attention at the figure of another girl who was seated a few yards away.

If the girl in the hammock was dreaming, her companion fitted oddly into her dream. She was dressed in a simple white muslin frock and her hair had a band of soft blue ribbon tied about it. In her lap lay an open book, but no page had been turned in the last fifteen minutes and indeed she was quieter than her friend who was supposed to be asleep.

“Betty,” a voice called softly, “bring your chair nearer to me. I have done my duty nobly for the past two hours and have not spoken a single, solitary word. So even the sternest of doctors and nurses can't say I am unfaithful to my rest cure. Besides it is absurd, now when I am as well as any one else. Yes, that is much better, Betty, and you are, please, to gaze directly into my face

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while I am talking to you. I haven't liked your fashion lately of staring off into space, as you were doing just recently and indeed on all occasions when you believe no one is paying any special attention to you."

With a low curtsey Betty did as she was commanded. She even knelt down on the ground beside the hammock to look the more directly into the eyes of her friend. But as she continued, unexpectedly a slow color crept into her cheeks from her throat upwards until it had flushed her entire face.

"I declare, Polly," she exclaimed jumping to her feet abruptly and sitting down in her chair again, "you make me feel as though I had committed some offence, though I do assure you I have been as good as gold, so far as I know, for a long, long time."

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Polly was silent a moment. "You know perfectly well, Betty, that I don't think you have done anything wrong. You need not use that excuse to try and deceive me, dear, because it does not make the slightest impression. The truth is, Betty, that you have a secret that you are keeping from me and from every one else so far as I know. Of course there isn't any reason why you should confide in me if you don't wish. You may be punishing me for my lack of confidence in you last winter."

This last statement was possibly made with a double intention. Betty responded to it instantly.

"Surely, Polly, you must know that would not make the slightest difference," she returned earnestly. And then the next instant, as if fearing that she might have betrayed herself: "But what in the world makes you think I am cherishing a secret, you absurd Polly? I suppose you have had to have something to think about these past two months, when you have spent so much time lying down. Well, when I see how you have improved I am quite willing to have been your victim."

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With a quick motion the other girl now managed to sit upright, piling her sofa cushions behind her. Her color was certainly sufficiently vivid at this instant. But indeed she was so improved in every way that one would hardly have known her for the Polly O'Neill of the past year's trials and successes. Her figure was almost rounded, her chin far less pointed and all the lines of fatigue and nervous strain had vanished from her face. But Polly's temper had not so materially changed!

"It isn't worth while to accuse me of having tried to spy into your private affairs, Princess," she replied haughtily. "But if you do feel that I have, then I ask your pardon for now and all times. I shall never be so offensive again."

There followed a vast and complete human silence. Then Polly got up from her resting place and went and put her arm quietly about her friend.

"Princess, I would rather that the stars should fall or the world come to an end, than have you really angry with me," she murmured. "But you know I did not mean to offend you by asking you to confide in me, don't you? Anyway I promise never, never to ask you again. Here, let me have the Woodford paper, please. I believe Billy brought us the afternoon edition. I wonder if he and Mollie will be gone on their boating expedition for long? They must have been around the lake half a dozen times already."

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As though dismissing the subject of their past conversation entirely from her mind, Polly, resuming her hammock, now buried herself in the columns of the Woodford *Gazette*. Apparently she had not observed that no reply had been made either to her accusation or apology. She could see that Betty was not seriously angry, which was the main thing.

"Get out your embroidery, Princess, and let me read the news aloud to you;" she demanded next. "I love to watch you sew. It is not because you do it so particularly well, but because you always manage to look like a picture in a book. Funny thing, dear, why you have such a different appearance from the rest of us. Oh, I am not saying that probably other girls are not as pretty as you are, Mollie and Meg for instance. But you have a different look somehow. No wonder Angel thinks you are a fairy princess."

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But at this moment an unexpected choking sound, that seemed in some fashion to have come forth from Betty, interrupted the flow of her friend's compliments.

"Please don't, Polly," she pleaded. "You know I love your Irish blarney most of the time beyond anything in this world. But now I want to tell you something. I have had a kind of a secret for over a year, but it is past now and I'm dreadfully sorry if you believe you find a change in me that you don't like. I suppose sometimes I do feel rather blue simply because I am of so little account in the world. Please don't think I am jealous, but you and Sylvia and Nan and Meg are all doing things and Esther and Edith and Eleanor are married and Mollie helps her mother with your big house. I believe Beatrice and Judith are both at college, though we have been separated from them for such a long time. So you see I am the only good-for-nothing in the old Sunrise Hill Camp Fire circle."

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"Yes, I see," was the somewhat curt reply from behind the outspread paper.

"Mrs. Martins told me yesterday that the surgeons Dr. Barton brought to see Angelique think she may be able to walk in another year or so and I believe Cricket is to give up her crutches altogether in a few months," Polly presently remarked.

In the sunshine Betty Ashton's face shone with happiness. "Yes, isn't it wonderful?" she remarked innocently.

"Of course, doing beautiful things for other people isn't being of the slightest use in the world," the other girl continued, as though talking to herself. "Yet Mrs. Martins also said yesterday, that

she and Angelique believed they had strayed into Paradise they were so happy here at the cabin with the prospect of Angel's growing better ahead of them. And I believe Cricket dances and sings with every step she takes nowadays."

"But I?" interrupted Betty.

"No, of course you have had nothing in the world to do with it and I never accused you for a single instant," her friend argued, and then Polly fell to reading the paper aloud. 225

"The friends of Doctor and Mrs. Richard Ashton, now of Boston, Massachusetts, but formerly of Woodford, New Hampshire, will be delighted to hear of the birth of their son, Richard Jr., on July the fourteenth.' How does it feel to be an aunt?" the reader demanded.

"Delicious," Betty sighed, and then began dreaming of her new nephew, wondering when she was to be allowed to see him, until Polly again interfered with her train of thought.

"Mr. and Mrs. Frank Wharton entertained at dinner last night in their new home in honor of Mr. Anthony Graham, our brilliant young congressman who has returned to Woodford for a few days.' Well, I like that!" Polly protested. "Think of Frank and Eleanor daring to give a dinner party and asking none of their other old friends or relatives. They *must* feel set up at being married before the rest of us."

For the first time Betty now actually took a few industrious stitches in her embroidery. "Oh, they probably did not have but two or three guests. You know how papers exaggerate things, Pollykins, I would not be so easily offended with my relations," she protested. 226

"No, but you used to be such an intimate friend of Anthony Graham's. Do you know I look upon him as one of your good works, Betty? I wonder if he will condescend to come to the cabin to see us, now he is such a busy and distinguished person. Is he as much a friend of yours now as he used to be?"

Unexpectedly Betty's thread broke, so that she was forced to make another knot before replying.

"Friend of mine? No, yes; well, that is we are friendly, of course, only Anthony has grown so fond of Meg Everett lately that he has not much time for any one else. But please don't speak of anything I ever did for him, Polly. I beg it of you as a special favor. In the first place it was so ridiculously little and in the second I think it pretty hard on Anthony to have an unfortunate accident like that raked up against him now that he has accomplished so much." 227

"Oh, all right," Polly returned, thoughtfully digging into the earth with the toe of her pretty kid slipper.

"Good heavens, speaking of angels or the other thing!" she exclaimed, a moment later, "I do declare if that does not look like Anthony Graham coming directly toward us this instant. Do go and speak to him first, dear, while I manage to scramble out of this hammock."

Ten minutes later Anthony was occupying the chair lately vacated by Betty, while Polly was once more in a reclining position. Knowing that she was still regarded as a semi-invalid, Anthony had insisted that she must not disturb herself on his account. He had explained that the reason for his call was to find out how she was feeling. So, soon after this statement, Betty had left the two of them together, giving as an excuse the fact that as she had invited Anthony to stay with them to tea she must go to the cabin to help get things ready.

After Betty's disappearance Polly did not find her companion particularly interesting. He scarcely said half a dozen words but sat staring moodily up toward the dark branches of the enshadowing pine trees. This at least afforded Polly a fine opportunity for studying the young man's face. 228

"You have improved a lot, Anthony," she said finally. "Oh, I beg your pardon, I am afraid I was thinking out loud."

Her visitor smiled. "Well, so long as your thoughts are complimentary I am sure I don't mind," he returned. "Keep it up, will you?"

The girl nodded. "There is nothing I should like better. You know it is odd, but the Princess and I were talking about you just when you appeared. I must say I am amazed at your prominence, Anthony. I never dreamed you would ever amount to so much. It was funny, but Betty used always to have faith in you. I often wondered why."

This time her companion did not smile. "I wish to heaven then that she had faith in me now, or if not faith at least a little of her old liking," he answered almost bitterly. "For the last year, for some reason or other, Miss Betty has seemed to dislike me. She has avoided me at every possible opportunity. And I have never been able to find out whether I had offended her or if she had merely grown weary of my friendship. I have been so troubled by it that I have made a confidant of Miss Everett and asked her to help me if she could. I thought perhaps if Betty—Miss Betty, I mean—could see that Meg Everett liked me and was willing to be my intimate friend, that possibly she might forgive me in time. But it has all been of no use, she has simply grown colder and colder. And I fear I only weary Miss Everett in talking of Miss Betty so much of the time. She recently told me that I did." 229

Polly's lips trembled and her shoulders shook. What a perfectly absurd creature a male person was at all times and particularly when under the influence of love!

The next moment the girl's face had strangely sobered.

"You are not worthy to tie her shoe-string, you know, Anthony; but then I never have seen any □

one whom I have thought worthy of her. Most certainly neither Esther nor I approved of the nobility as represented by young Count Von Reuter."

Aloud Polly continued this interesting debate with herself, apparently not concerned with whether or not her companion understood her.

"Certainly I am unworthy to tie *any one's* shoe-string," the young man murmured finally, "but would you mind confiding in me just whose shoe-string you mean?"

From under her dark lashes half resentfully and half sympathetically the girl surveyed the speaker. "You have a sense of humor, Anthony, and that is something to your credit," she remarked judicially. "Well, much as I really hate to say it, I might as well tell you that I don't think the Princess dislikes you intensely, provided you tell her just why you have been so intimate with Meg for these past months. No, I have nothing more to say. Only I am going down to the lake for half an hour to join Mollie and Billy Webster and if you wait here you may have a chance of speaking to Betty alone when she comes to invite us in to tea."

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Then quietly Polly O'Neill strolled away with every appearance of calmness, although she was really feeling greatly perturbed and distressed. Certainly something must have worked a reformation in her character, for although she positively hated the idea of Betty Ashton's marrying, had she not just thrust her deliberately into the arms of her fate. Yet, of course, her feeling was a purely selfish one, since she had no real fault to find with Anthony. So if Betty loved him, he must have his chance.

Then with a smile and a sigh Polly once more shrugged her shoulders, which is the Irish method of acknowledging that fate is too strong for the strongest of us. She reached the edge of the lake and madly signaled to Mollie and Billy to allow her to enter their boat. They were at no great distance off and yet were extremely slow in approaching the shore. Evidently they seemed to feel no enthusiasm for the newcomer's society at the present moment.

"I thought you were asleep, Polly," Mollie finally murmured in a reproachful tone, while Billy Webster eyed his small canoe rather doubtfully.

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"She won't carry a very heavy load, Miss Polly," he remarked, drawing alongside. Polly calmly climbed into the skiff, taking her seat in the stern.

"I can't sleep all the time, sister of mine," she protested, once she was comfortably established, "much as I should like to accommodate my family and friends by the relief from my society. And as for my being too heavy for your canoe, Billy Webster, I don't weigh nearly so much as Mollie. So if you think both of us too heavy, she might as well get out and give me a chance. You have been around this lake with her at least a dozen times already this afternoon. Besides, I really have to be allowed to remain somewhere."

Plainly Mollie's withdrawal from the scene had no place in Billy's calculations, for without further argument he moved out toward the middle of the pond.

## CHAPTER XX—Two Engagements

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Ten minutes more must have passed before Betty decided to return to her friends. Yet during her short walk to the pine grove she was still oddly shy and nervous and in a mood wholly dissatisfied with herself. Why in the world did she so often behave coldly to Anthony Graham and with such an appearance of complete unfriendliness? There was nothing further from her own desire, for certainly he had an entire right to have transferred his affection to Meg! To show either anger or pique was small and unwomanly!

Never had there been definite understanding between Anthony and herself. Indeed she had always refused even to listen to any serious expression of his affection for her. Long ago there had been a single evening after her return from Germany, when together they had watched the moon go down behind Sunrise Hill, an evening which she had not been able to forget. Yet she had only herself to blame for the weakness, since if Anthony had forgotten, no girl should cherish such a memory alone.

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Now here was an opportunity for proving both her courage and pride. With the thought of her old title of Princess, Betty's cheeks had flamed. How very far she had always been from living up to its real meaning. Yet she must hurry on and cease this absurd and selfish fashion of thinking of herself. A cloud had come swiftly up out of the east and in a few moments there would be a sudden July downpour. Often a brief storm of wind and rain closed an unusually warm day in the New Hampshire hills.

Under no circumstances must Polly suffer. Only a week before had Mrs. Wharton been persuaded to leave Polly in their charge when she and Mollie had both promised to take every possible care of her.

Suddenly Betty began running so that she arrived quite breathless at her destination. Her face was flushed, and from under the blue ribbon her hair had escaped and was curling in red-brown tendrils over her white forehead. Then at the entrance to the group of pines, before she has even become aware of Polly's disappearance, Anthony Graham had unexpectedly caught hold of both

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her hands.

"Betty, you must listen to me," he demanded. "No, I can't let you go until I have spoken, for if I do you will find some reason for escaping me altogether as you have been doing these many months. You must know I love you and that I have cared for no one else since the hour of our first meeting. Always I have thought of you, always worked to be in some small way worthy even of daring to say I love you. Yet something has come between us during this past year and it is only fair that you should tell me what it is. I do not expect you to love me, Betty, but once you were my friend and I could at least tell you my hopes and fears. Is it that you are engaged to some one else and take this way of letting me know?"

Still Anthony kept close hold of the girl's hands, and now after her first effort she made no further attempt to draw herself away. His eyes were fixed upon hers with an expression that there was no mistaking, yet something in the firm and resolute lines about his mouth revealed the will responsible for Anthony Graham's success and power. Quietly he now drew his companion closer beneath the shelter of the trees, for the first drops of rain were beginning to fall.

"But I am still your friend, Anthony. You are mistaken in thinking that anything has come between us. As for my being engaged to some one else that is quite untrue. I only thought that you and Meg were so intimate that you no longer needed me." For the first time Betty's voice faltered.

Anthony was saying in a tone she should never forget even among the thousands of incidents in their crowded lives, "I shall always need and want you, Betty, to the last instant of created time." Then he brought both her hands up to his lips and kissed them. "Meg was only enduring my friendship so that I might have some one with whom I could talk about you."

Suddenly Anthony let go Betty's hands and stepped back a few paces away from her. His face had lost the radiant look of a brief moment before.

"Betty, a little while ago you told me that you were still my friend and that no one had come between us, and it made me very happy. But I tell you honestly that I do not think I can be happy with such an answer for long. Two years ago, when you and I together watched the moon over Sunrise Hill, I dared not then say more than I did, I had not enough to offer you. But now things are different and it isn't your friendship I want! Ten thousand times, no! It is your love! Do you think, Betty, that you can ever learn to love me?"

Now Betty's face was white and her gray eyes were like deep wells of light.

"Learn to love you, Anthony? Why I am not a school girl any longer and I learned that lesson years and years ago."

When the storm finally broke and the thunder crashed between the heavy deluges of rain neither Anthony nor Betty cared to make for the nearby shelter of Sunrise cabin. Instead they stood close together laughing up at the sky and at the lovely rain-swept world. Once Betty did remember to inquire for the vanished Polly, but Anthony assured her that Polly had joined Mollie and Billy half an hour before and that they would of course take the best possible care of her.

Nevertheless at this instant Polly O'Neill was actually floundering desperately about in the waters of Sunrise Lake while trying to make her way to the side of their overturned skiff. Billy Webster, with his arm about Mollie, was swimming with her safely toward shore.

"Don't be frightened, it is all right, dear. I'll look after Polly in a moment," he whispered encouragingly.

Returning a few moments later Billy discovered his other companion, a very damp and discomfited mermaid, seated somewhat perilously upon the bottom of their wrecked craft.

"I never knew such behavior in my life, Billy Webster," she began angrily, as soon as she was able to get her wet hair out of her mouth. "The idea of your going all the way into shore with Mollie and leaving me to drown. You might at least have seen that I got safe hold of your old boat first."

"Yes, I know; I am sorry," Billy replied, resting one hand on the side of his skiff and so bringing his head up out of the water in order to speak more distinctly. "But you see, Polly, I knew you could swim and Mollie is so easily frightened and it all came so suddenly, the boat's overturning with that heavy gust of wind. To tell you the truth, I didn't even remember you were aboard until Mollie began asking for you. I wonder if you would mind helping me get this skiff right side up. It would be easier for us to paddle in than for me to have to swim with you."

Gasping, Polly slid off her perch.

"After that extra avalanche of cold water nothing matters," she remarked icily. However, her companion did not even hear her.

Safe on land again, Polly waited under a tree while the young man pulled his boat ashore. Her sister had gone ahead to send some one down with blankets and umbrellas. In spite of the rain, damp clothes and the shock of her recent experience, Polly O'Neill was not conscious of feeling particularly cold.

"I hope you are not very uncomfortable, and that our accident won't make you ill again," Billy Webster said a few moments later as he joined her. "I suppose I do owe you a little more explanation for having ignored you so completely. But you see, just about five minutes before you

insisted on getting into our boat Mollie had promised to be my wife. We did not dare talk very much after you came on board, but you can understand that I simply wasn't able to think of any one else. You see I have loved Mollie ever since that day when we were children and she bound up the wound you had made in my head."

Once more Polly gasped slightly, and of course she was beginning to feel somewhat chilled.

Billy Webster looked at her severely. "Oh, of course I did think I was in love with you, Polly, for a year or so, I remember. But that was simply because I had not then learned to understand Mollie's true character. I used to believe it would be a fine thing to have a strong influence over you and try to show you the way you should go." Here Billy laughed, and he was very handsome with his damp hair pushed back over his bronzed face and his wet clothes showing the outline of his splendid boyish figure, matured and strengthened by his outdoor life.

"But you see, Polly, I believe nobody is ever going to be able to influence you to any great extent," he continued teasingly, "and at any rate you and I will never have half the chances to quarrel that we would have had if we had ever learned to like each other. I forgive you everything now for Mollie's sake."

For half a moment Polly hesitated, then, holding out her hand, her blue eyes grew gay and tender.

"Thank you, Billy," she said, "for Mollie's sake. If you make her as happy as I think you will, why, I'll also forget and forgive you everything."

Fortunately by the time Mrs. Martins and Ann had arrived with every possible comfort for the invalid. And so Polly was borne to the cabin in the midst of their anxious inquiries and put to bed, where neither her sister nor Betty were allowed to see her during the evening.

If either of the girls suffered from the deprivation of her society there was nothing that gave any indication of unhappiness in either of the two faces.

## CHAPTER XXI—At the Turn of the Road

"By day, upon my golden hill  
Between the harbor and the sea,  
I feel as if I well could fill  
The world with golden melody.  
There is no limit to my view,  
No limit to my soft content,  
Where sky and water's fairy blue  
Merge to the eye's bewilderment."

Polly read from the pages of a magazine, and then pausing for a moment she again repeated the verse aloud, giving each line all the beauty and significance of which it was capable.

She was walking alone along a path beyond the grove of pine trees one Sunday morning about ten days later. She wore no hat and her dress was of plain white muslin without even a ribbon belt for decoration. She had a bunch of blue corn flowers, which she had lately gathered, pinned to her waist and was looking particularly young and well.

Yet for the first time since her home coming Polly had recently been feeling somewhat lonely and neglected. There was at present absolutely no counting on Mollie for anything. Billy had always made demands upon her time when they were simply friends, but since their engagement had been announced there was never an entire afternoon or even morning when Mollie was free. In answer to Polly's protests that she was only to be at home during the summer and so would like to see her only sister alone now and then, Billy had explained that early August was the only month in which he had any real leisure and that he and Mollie must therefore make plans for their future at once. Moreover, as it was self-evident that her sister preferred her fiancé's society to her own, Polly had been forced to let the matter drop.

Then a week before, Betty had gone to Boston to see Esther and her new nephew, which was discouraging for her friend. For as Anthony had been too busy to come to the cabin except in the evenings, Polly had the Princess to herself during the day time.

She had promised Betty to stay on at the cabin until her return, as the simple, outdoor life seemed to be doing her so much good; nevertheless, Polly had determined to go into Woodford in the next few days and persuade her mother to take her away unless things at the cabin became more interesting. She was now rested and entirely well and more than anxious to get back to her work again, since the friends on whom she had depended were at present too absorbed to give her much of their time or thought.

"Well, Margaret Adams always told me that 'a career' was a lonely kind of life," Polly thought to herself. "But oh, what wouldn't I give if Margaret should appear at this moment at the turn of that road. She must have had my letter on Friday begging her to come and perhaps she had no other engagement. It will be delightful, too, if she brings Mr. Hunt along with her. I told her to ask him, as Billy can make him comfortable at the farm. I should like him to see Sunrise cabin

and the beautiful country about here.”

Polly had finally come to the end of her lane and beyond could see the road leading out from the village. She was a little weary, as she had not walked any distance in several months until this morning. There was a convenient seat under the shade of a great elm tree that commanded a view of the country and she had her magazine with her and could hear the noise of an approaching motor car or carriage, should Margaret have decided to come.

Again Polly fell to memorizing the poem she had been trying to learn during her stroll. It was good practice to get back into the habit of training her memory, and the poem seemed oddly descriptive of her present world.

“Tonight, upon my somber gaze  
With gleam of silvered waters lit,  
I feel as if I well could praise  
The moon——”

Here Polly was interrupted by the sound of a voice saying:

“My dear Miss Polly, I never dreamed of finding you so well. Why, if you only had the famous torn hat and rake you would pass for Maud Muller any day!”

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With a cry of welcome Polly jumped to her feet.

“Mr. Hunt, I am so glad to see you and so surprised!” she exclaimed. “Please explain how you managed, when I have been watching for you and Margaret all morning, to arrive without my knowing?”

“But we have not arrived, and I hope you won’t be too greatly disappointed at my coming alone. You see it is like this. I happened to be calling on Miss Adams when your note came and she told me that I had been included in your invitation. Well, it was impossible for Miss Adams to spend this week end with you as she was going off on a yachting party with some of her rich admirers, so I decided to run down and see you alone. It was not so remarkable my coming upon you unawares, since I walked out from the village. Please do sit down again and tell me you are glad to see me.”

Polly sat down as she was bid, and Richard Hunt, dropping on the ground near her, took off his hat, leaning his head on his hand like a tired boy.

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“Come, hurry, you haven’t said you were glad yet, Miss Polly,” he protested.

Polly’s eyes searched the dark ones turned half-teasingly and half-admiringly toward her.

“Do you mean, Mr. Hunt, that you came all the way from New York to Woodford just to see me?” she asked wonderingly. “And that you came alone, without Margaret or any one else?”

Her companion laughed, pushing back the iron gray hair from his forehead, for his long walk had been a warm one.

“I do assure you I haven’t a single acquaintance concealed anywhere about me,” he declared. “But just the same I don’t see why you should feel so surprised. Don’t you know that I would travel a good many miles to spend an hour alone with you, instead of a long and blissful day. Of course I am almost old enough to be your father——”

“You’re not,” Polly interrupted rather irritably. Yet in spite of her protest she was feeling curiously shy and self-conscious and Polly was unaccustomed to either of these two emotions. Then, just in order to have something to do, she carelessly drew the bunch of corn flowers from her belt and held them close against her hot cheeks.

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“Mr. Hunt,” she began after a moment of awkward silence, “don’t think I am rude, but please do not say things to me like—” the girl hesitated—“like that last thing; I mean your being willing to travel many miles to spend an hour alone with me. You have always been so kind that I have thought of you as my real friend, but of course if you begin to be insincere and flatter me as you would some one whom you did not honestly like, I——”

Polly ceased talking at this instant because Richard Hunt had risen quickly to his feet and put forth his hand to assist her.

“Let us go on to your cabin,” he replied gravely. “You are right. I should not have said a thing like that to you. But you are wrong, Polly, in believing I was insincere. You see, I grew to be pretty fond of you last winter and very proud, seeing with what courage you fought your battles alone.” Richard Hunt paused, walking on a few paces in silence. “I shall not worry you with the affection of a man so much older than you are,” he continued as though having at last made up his mind to say all that was in his heart and be through. “Only at all times and under all circumstances, no matter what happens, you are to remember, Polly, that you are and always shall be first with me.”

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“I—you,” the girl faltered. “Why I thought you cared for Margaret. I never dreamed—” then somehow Polly, who had always so much to say, could not even finish her sentence.

“No, of course you never did,” the man replied gravely. “Still, I want you to know that Margaret and I have never thought of being anything but the best of friends. Now let us talk of something else, only tell me first that you are not angry and we will never speak of this again.”

“No, I am not displeased,” Polly faltered, looking and feeling absurdly young and inadequate to the importance of the situation.

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Then, walking on and keeping step with her companion, suddenly a new world seemed to have spread itself before her eyes. Shyly she stole a glance at her tall companion, and then laid her hand coaxingly on his coat sleeve.

"Will you please stop a minute. I want to explain something to you," she asked. Polly's expression was intensely serious; she had never been more in earnest; all the color seemed to have gone from her face so as to leave her eyes the more deeply blue.

"You see, Mr. Hunt, I never, never intend marrying any one. I mean to devote all my life to my profession and I have never thought of anything else since I was a little girl."

Gravely Richard Hunt nodded. Not for an instant did his face betray any doubt of Polly's decision in regard to her future. Then Polly laughed and her eyes changed from their former seriousness to a look of the gayest and most charming camaraderie. "Still, Mr. Hunt, if you really did mean what you said just now, why I don't believe I shall mind if we do speak of it some day again. Of course I am not in love with you, but——"

Richard Hunt slipped the girl's arm inside his. There was something in his face that gave Polly a sense of strength and quiet such as she had never felt in all her restless, ambitious girlhood.

"Yes, I understand," he answered. "But look there, Polly, isn't that Sunrise Hill over there and your beloved little cabin in the distance? And aren't we glad to be alive in this wonderful world?"

The girl's voice was like a song. "I never knew what it meant to be really alive until this minute," she whispered.

The sixth volume of the Camp Fire Girls Series will be known as "The Camp Fire Girls in After Years." In this story the girls will appear as wives and mothers. Also it will reveal the fact that romance does not end with marriage, and that in many cases a woman's life story is only beginning upon her wedding day. There will be new characters, a new plot and new love interests as well, but in the main the theme will follow the fortunes of the same group of girls who years ago formed a Camp Fire club and lived, worked and loved under the shadow of Sunrise Hill.

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE CAMP FIRE GIRLS' CAREERS \*\*\*

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